

S. S. Misha

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S. S. Misha

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Life and Personality

Early Life, Education and Employment

Sohan Singh Misha was born in the princely State of Kapurthala on 30 August 1934 at a critical time in the lives of the people and in the history of the country. India was in the grip of a deep depression. There was a widespread movement for freedom against the British colonial rule. Internationally, fascists had come to power in Italy and Germany, and the World War was imminent. In Kapurthala and other princely States, people were agitating for the end of princely rule and their merger in India. Misha's father, Inder Singh, was a tailor by profession and made a meagre living under the conditions of the depression, when money was scarce and most people depended upon the barter system to make both ends meet. His wife stayed home and looked after their family of one son and four daughters. Though illiterate, Inder Singh was an enlightened individual who understood the significance of the struggle against colonialism and the link between education and political and economic independence. Though he himself did not participate in any political agitation, yet he did not limit his son's awareness of the larger world and his place in it. Inder Singh wanted his son to receive good education and to excel in something professional or careerist.

Education was never a priority for British colonial administration or for the princely rulers of States like Kapurthala. Nobody was required by law to receive education. Hence there were only a few schools in urban and rural areas, more in Kapurthala than in the British-controlled Punjab. Many of them had been established by Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or other religious groups and a few by the government. Religious-controlled schools imparted communal or separatist notions of irreconcilable

differences between Hindus and Muslims. These schools provided poor facilities in terms of buildings, playgrounds, lab equipments, libraries or sports. Rural schools were especially notorious for inadequacies of every kind, because there was no electricity or water for the daily needs. Open fields were the toilets.

Education in the Punjab or the princely States like Kapurthala was neither compulsory nor free. Because of social prejudice and backwardness, there were almost no schools for girls. Farming was the primary occupation of people in the villages, and farmers needed their children to help in agriculture in different ways. Manual labour was in short supply, and no farmer could afford to hire anyone because of his meager income. Except for a few landlords, land holdings of most of the farmers were small. Many families worked on the land as tenants and paid one-third or even half of their harvest to their landlords. Since farming in the Punjab depended on rains, nobody could be sure of the output of his harvest. If parents were interested in education at all, instead they would send their boys, not girls, to school. Small and tenant farmers usually did not have any finance and could not pay for tuition or books and supplies.

Misha enrolled at a neighbouring rural school in 1940 and walked four miles to attend classes. The four-mile trip each way to school was not easy, because children carried their bags of books on their shoulders or heads along with lunches. Since there were only a few schools in rural areas, Misha was lucky enough to attend on at a distance of four miles, through green fields and on dirty roads. Pencils, paper and other supplies were scarce. Books were expensive. Only a small number of school-age children went for education. Hence most of the people in the Punjab in the nineteen-thirties were illiterate, like Misha's father. Rural schools were small in size and had only a few teachers who never spared the rod and rote method to force their students to read stories and learn tables. Students sat on jute-carpet runners on the floor with their bags of books, wooden boards,

slates and supplies. They carried ink in bottles and carved their quills for writing. There was no black board. The teacher stood at one end of a bare room and shouted his lessons for students to repeat after him.

The Second World War had started and India had intensified its movement for independence. There were shortages of food and clothing throughout the country. A famine in Bengal had killed over a million. People were agitating against British rule everywhere. The British administration arrested large numbers of political activists. These events touched and moulded the lives of everyone, young and old. Misha was too young to participate in these exciting events, but he developed a sense that exploitation and poverty were the lot of a large majority of the people. School textbooks may force students to recite the benefits of British rule, but nobody had any illusions about the economic and social inequities of colonialism. As we know, on August 15, 1947, the country ended its colonial status, but its virtual colonial status did not change. Exploitation and poverty continued the same way.

The medium of instruction in primary and high schools was Urdu in Persian script, and a student's first duty was to learn the alphabet. In the third grade, students were introduced to simple stories and poems in Urdu and gradually expanded their range of reading. As they moved up the grades, they studied arithmetic, geometry and history. They took up English in the fifth grade. The teachers of English stressed grammar and elementary vocabulary and simple reading, but they made no effort to encourage students to write or speak. The one language Misha was never allowed to study in school was Punjabi. Like most of his class fellows, he had to learn himself to read and write it.

In 1948, Misha shifted to Randhir High School, Kapurthala. A majority of its students came from the city, and he and other students from the rural areas had to make adjustments to their new social environment. It was an urban school, with brick buildings and desks and chairs in classrooms. Misha wanted to shed away

his rural manners and adopt the sophisticated attitudes of a city dweller. But he never lost his link with the village where his parents lived. Here, he studied English at a higher level and improved his pronunciation. Even though everyone spoke Punjabi, their mother tongue, the bright ones like Misha tried to speak English a little. He could read with ease, but writing was never emphasized in the classroom. Teachers required their students to memorize essays on topics like "My First Day at School" for their examination. This education was a mixed blessing for Misha.

In 1950, Misha was enrolled at Randhir College, Kapurthala, founded by the Maharaja of Kapurthala in 1856, one year before India's First War of Independence. It was the oldest institution of English-based learning in the Punjab region. The College took pride in its traditions of well-rounded education and urbane culture. Giving courses in the liberal arts and science, it had catered to the aspirations of a small social and economic elite that wanted jobs in the princely and colonial governments and the army. Misha studied mathematics, physics and chemistry and opted for the pre-medical in the College. Harbhajan Singh Hundal also got enrolled as a fresher at Randhir College in 1951. He observes how he and other students commuted "in shabby clothes" on "rickety bicycles" and carried "frugal meals". He and his classmates wore "striped pyjamas instead of pants," but Misha was usually "properly dressed" because his father was a tailor.

To enhance his image as a sophisticated urbanite, Misha had cut his hair. He took up smoking and occasional drinking too. Always dressed in city clothes like trousers and shirts, Misha won friends by spending his pocket money on them. He composed sad and sentimental ghazals and other types of poetry. Randhir College was a co-educational institution and provided Misha the opportunities to befriend girls. He was somewhat irregular in attending lectures and amused his friends with folk songs and jocular stories, as he had done in high

school. There was animosity and hostility between the urban and rural students, and Misha was one of the few who could bridge the gap. He could speak to both the groups in their own idiom. He realized that his rural friends possessed certain integrity and honesty while many of his urban friends were unreliable and dishonest.

A typical day at the College consisted of attending lectures, sitting around with friends at tea stalls, and chatting about social and political issues. Misha whiled away his free hours with friends. This routine rarely varied. Misha returned home to a house without electricity and would try to read his textbooks under a kerosene-oil lamp. His parents and sisters would urge him to study hard, so that he could qualify for a career in medicine or civil service, but their exhortations did not make much impression on Misha. He had his own ideas about the best way to spend his time and about his goals in life, and he did not share them with his parents or friends.

Misha tended to neglect his lectures, but he kept up with his studies regularly enough to get pass marks. He wanted to grasp the link between education, society and intellectual development. He felt that his colonial education could not enlighten his mind and did not expand his social and mental horizons. He often wondered if his education would help him in becoming a secular, democratic and enlightened individual who would transcend caste and ethnic considerations. Unfortunately, the colleges reinforced the religious and caste differences and the value of private property and exploitation. Misha did not give up his studies, but he adopted a critical outlook towards learning.

One of the limitations of rote learning was that students were not allowed to develop a critical response to their reading of fiction, poetry or plays. It did not matter how someone reacted to a poem. Students were supposed to learn a few critical phrases and repeat them in their examinations. There was no interaction between the reader and the writer. This restricted severely a

student's chance to form an independent opinion or to have confidence in his evaluation of a piece of writing. The most regrettable feature of this method is that students did not acquire any criteria to assess writings in English, Urdu or Punjabi. English was an isolated subject that had no bearing on a person's life in a village or town.

In spite of these limitations, Misha had developed a keenness for English Romantic lyrics by P.B. Shelley, John Keats, Lord Byron and others. The long poems of Shelley and Keats were too remote from a student's experience, but they could relish the odes and sonnets and even memorize some of them. The lyric mode was close in feeling and sentiment to some of the ghazals in Urdu and Punjabi and easier to handle. Misha also believed, erroneously, that an English lyric could not be rendered into Punjabi or Urdu, because it would not sound right. This reflected his willingness to keep English, Urdu and Punjabi in three separate compartments. The English reader in him did not converse with the other two. Similarly, the composition of lyrics in Punjabi did not get mixed up with the diction and rhythm of lyrics in English.

Misha received what might be labelled as colonial education which had been introduced by the British in the nineteenth century. It was neither a tool for social or political change nor an instrument for dissemination of enlightened and democratic ideas. It was anti-national in character and backward in methods of teaching. Schools and colleges inculcated religious and communal divisions in society on the basis of which the British had divided and ruled the country. Students used English, history, economics and other textbooks written for institutions in the British Isles and North America. The Indian authors of guides or handbooks in these subjects followed the medieval method of copying from different foreign authorities and committed all kinds of mistakes. The language of instruction was English in the colleges. This system promised students an advancement in career through civil-service competitions and professional and teaching jobs, but only a small number ever quali-

fied for these positions.

While studying at Kapurthala, Misha became interested in various groups and started helping in the distribution of newspapers and pamphlets of the Communist Party of India. He also cemented his friendship with the local Party secretary, Joginder Shamsher, whom he had met in 1950 when he attended a sports event at Kala Sanghia and won first prize in high jump and slow cycling. Shamsher proved to be a life-long friend to Misha and shared his literary and political aspirations. He stimulated Misha's interest in progressive writing and especially Russian poetry and fiction.

Hundal describes the relationship of Misha and Shamsher by pointing out some of their political and literary concerns:

Joginder Shamsher was a well-known Punjabi poet. These were the days of the peace movement. Joginder Shamsher was very popular among students. He had a magnetic appeal. Misha was already his admirer. At that time, Joginder Shamsher's poem on the peace movement had gained popularity. We hummed this poem in our vacant periods. Misha had become a worker of Student Federation of India. He collected fees for the membership of the Federation. It was just one anna or one-sixteenth of a rupee. With a receipt book in hand, Misha persuaded students with his arguments, urging them to take part in politics. Just to put him off, we had ready-made excuses to offer him. He responded to our excuses with a clear and calm mind.

Misha enthusiastically took part in cultural functions like poetry readings and debates and political activities like student union. He was elected General Secretary of Randhir College Students' Union. In the course of these poetry recitations Misha listened minutely to the comments of his audience and tried to get some sense of the rhythm, diction and emotional appeal of a poem. Similarly, his politics helped him to place his reading and writing in the wider context of the movement against obscurantism and oppression. What he neglected was his textbooks of pre-medical.

Joginder Shamsheer admitted that Misha was always a reliable friend, took a profound interest in Punjabi writing, and made romantic associations with women at Randhir College:

Misha, who was the General Secretary of the College Association, started taking deep interest in Punjabi literature and ultimately became the editor of his College magazine. He also received political influences, which led him to the study of Russian literature. A married girl of his village started flirting with him. At this, his parents engaged him to a girl of their choice at Delhi. Misha was a person deeply attached to his friends. He composed poems depicting new consciousness and used new metaphors and symbols to convey his ideas. Professor Mohan Singh encouraged him in his early years by publishing his poems in his monthly, *Punj Darya*. Misha passed through a trying period during the early months of 1950. Some unscrupulous friends exploited his habit of overspending and, at the same time, pretended to be his friends.

Misha intensified his efforts in composing poetry at Randhir College. To quote Hundal again:

He wrote a poem on the basis of a short story by Santokh Singh Dhir in the form of an epistle to a Pakistani friend. Thus he got published in the same magazine of *Randhir*. He also composed some poems which he got published in the same magazine. Misha would recite his poems to his friends and encourage them to read progressive journals like *Preet Lari* and *Phulwari*. When students went on a strike in Randhir College for a week, Misha addressed their rallies. These engagements did not allow Misha to fulfil his academic ambitions in College. First, he studied the medical option in the hope of applying for admission to a medical college; then he opted for non-medical science subjects, and finally he took up English and Humanities. After finishing two years, Misha went to Government College (later called Punjab University College), Hoshiarpur, in 1953.

Misha's poetic temperament was not suitable for science subjects, but it took him a few years to accept this.

With the partition of the Punjab between India and Pakistan, Punjab University and its affiliated colleges in Lahore were lost, and the government had to find a sub-

stitute for the University in a hurry. The new Punjab University moved its postgraduate teaching in Arts and Sciences to Hoshiarpur. Punjab University College, Hoshiarpur, in the 1950s was an intellectual, literary and educational centre of the Punjab and produced a large number of writers, teachers, scientists, civil servants, and intellectuals. Its faculty and students created an exciting environment of reading and writing. Students held debates about India's past and future, took up controversies and antagonisms about secular and communal politics, and discussed choices of careers. Who were the progressive writers in English and what kind of models did they provide for writing in Indian languages? Was India really free or still a colony? Was the Indian National Congress genuinely nationalist and what was the future of the Communist Party of India? What could one do with one's academic qualifications? What kind of poetry and fiction should one write? How could one advance the cause of freedom and enlightenment in the country? These questions interested almost every student.

The Department of English of Hoshiarpur consisted of a number of learned and conscientious professors like A.G. Stock, R.K. Kaul, Shiv K. Kumar and Jagdish Chander, and its head was a shrewd academic politician, Diwan Chand Sharma, who was also a Member of Parliament. Sharma, R.K. Kaul, Shiv K. Kumar and Jagdish Chander had received their education in Lahore in the colonial tradition. Sharma had also taught at D.A.V. College, Lahore. Kaul and Kumar had gone to London and Cambridge, respectively, for their doctorates. A graduate of Oxford, Miss Stock had come to India to teach English. Gurbachan Singh Talib also taught there for a few years.

The two-year M.A. course in English in the 1950s consisted of a comprehensive examination in six three-hour, written papers at the end of the second year. Students attended lectures during the day and participated in discussions, debates and other cultural activities during the afternoon or evening. Missing conspicuously from

this method of instruction was any kind of instruction in writing. Students read books, took notes, and tried to write whatever they could in the examination. The examination system was rigorous and only a small number was placed in the first or second divisions.

Misha read poetry, fiction, plays and prose and preferred especially Romantic poets like Shelley, playwrights like William Shakespeare, and novelists like Thomas Hardy. Misha and other students could not read and write English with felicity. Hence their response to literature was poor because they had no appreciation of the diction and rhythm of prose and poetry in English. Also, they had little background in the history, politics, religion and philosophy of the British Isles. They could not grasp the sensibility, which produced these writers, and could not understand the values and concerns underlying the changes and innovations in style and language. Misha had some idea of the distinctive features of style in neo-classical poets like Alexander Pope, Romantics like William Wordsworth, Victorians like Tennyson, and modernists like T.S. Eliot, but he could not fathom the controversies surrounding these changes. Hence theatre was only a remote link between Misha the reader and Misha the aspiring poet.

Most college and university lecturers taught about criticism of a book rather than an appreciation of the text and a student response to it. Teachers came to class with copious notes and read them monotonously. Some of them even copied one book by hand and read it in the class instead of reading directly from it. One of the instructors, who lectured on fiction, kept on reading E.M. Foster's *Aspects of the Novel*. Every teacher of Shakespeare relied on A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, originally published in 1904. Character analyses dominated their teaching of plays and fiction. Nobody urged a student to write about his readings and to formulate his aesthetic responses to English poetry, plays and fiction. Students memorized the opinions of various critics to prepare for their final examinations. From the

perspective of present-day educational philosophy, college and university education has been ruined by a mixed legacy of outdated courses and syllabi, the rigidity of the examination system, the antiquated methods of dictating notes in the class, and the lack of emphasis on research and writing. Teachers did not grade their own students and established no link with them in the classroom.

Misha's friends at Punjab University College included Gurdial Mander, Anand Kumar Singh Bal *alias* Nandi, Jeet Singh Bhango, Surjit Hans, Yashdip Bains, Jagmohan Joshi, Satish Kumar Batra, to mention a few of the closest ones. Nandi had received a degree in M.A. in Political Science, Mander an M.Sc. in Physics, and Bhango an M.Sc. in Biology from Punjab University College, Hoshiarpur. Surjit Hans and Yashdip Bains received their M.A. degrees in English. Mander had joined the Indian Police Service, Nandi, the Indian Postal and Telegraph Service, and Bhango, the Indian Administrative Service. Misha's relationship with these friends was based on profound trust which also involved constant give-and-take policy. Any time he read a poem to this group, he would be bombarded with criticism of every word, line, symbol and idea. They would submit him to the most merciless scrutiny and sometimes made him feel despondent about his capabilities in the art of poetry. This was a rare kind of training for Misha. His friends defended him against frivolous comments and shared with him their knowledge of literary and political movements in English, Urdu and Punjabi. Instead of resenting their assessments, Misha invited them constantly to evaluate his creative efforts. This group may be said to have influenced Misha the most of his life and his reading and writing. He read extensively in progressive writing from around the world, in English, Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi, and in Bengali and other Indian languages in translation.

The centre of intellectual and social gatherings at Punjab University College was the TKT Club and Bhojan

Bhandar Restaurant on campus. The TKT Club was founded by Miss Stock and R.K. Kaul in 1953, with the support of R.P. Bambah and T.Srinivasan from Mathematics and Gautam Mathur and Manmohan Singh from Economics. Its regulars included some of the brightest students like B.N. Goswami (History), Surjit Hans (English), and M.M. Puri (Political Science). The emphasis here was on witty and thoughtful analyses of literary and cultural problems. One of its features was the recitations of poems in Urdu and Punjabi. The TKT members also discussed the books they had been reading and explored the kinds of poetry in Punjabi, Hindi or Urdu that would be suitable for a post-colonial society. Kaul provided hospitality at his house to continue these conversations. Misha belonged to this select group and benefited immensely from the informal meetings.

For his political and social activities Misha and other students gathered frequently at the campus Bhojan Bhandar and at the one near the clock tower square in town. 'This is where political deals were made and campaigns launched during student union elections; friends were made and lost; and people fell in and out of love. In a liberal co-educational environment of the college, boys and girls met shyly, exchanged glances, and sometimes took vows of marriage. Still, everyone felt inhibited by the conservative attitudes of the society at large. Misha thrived in this congenial setting. He felt fully challenged by his friends and tried to come up to their expectations. This was an idyllic period of two years for Misha and others which would not happen again. Misha cherished it most for his memories of lectures, recitations, music, drinking, and conversations. He made more lasting friendships there than any time before or after.

At Punjab University College, Hoshiarpur, Misha faced boldly intelligent and knowledgeable, sympathetic and hostile, generous and belligerent listeners and exposed himself to their criticism and ridicule. Some of his friends and critics are the best witnesses to his maturing process as a poet. Surjit Hans explains Misha's gradual

awareness of the limitations of a sentimental outlook and the usefulness of attentive audience:

Misha was of amicable nature. He in a way discovered me. He seldom agreed with me. He had no compulsion to do so. His poems were published. Success authenticates a person's views but the correctness or otherwise of someone's ideas has nothing to do with success. Once *Lohri* was celebrated in the College. At night poetical symposium was held. When Gurdial Mander and Misha recited their poems, the listeners threw at them about two kilograms of sesame seed-covered sugar candy [*reories*]. This gave a setback to Misha's doctrine of people's literature. But he could not come out of the circle of this doctrine. Misha was sentimental and the sentimentality of folk literature attracted him. His inner self was soft or weak. He tried to soften the hardships of his childhood by resorting to this sentimental approach. His softness acquired the form of "low tone."

Surjit Hans exerted an influence on Misha throughout his life. He was a superior talent, keeping a critical eye on the younger poet: "What would Hans think of this?" This relationship worked to Misha's immense benefit over the years.

An unfriendly response from his College contemporaries created a crisis for Misha. It was fine to read and recite folk songs, but these songs were not suitable models for anyone writing in Punjabi. Misha would have succumbed to a deep depression without good responses from the public. His sense of the world was constantly nourished by these links with people. He was constantly watching what pleased the public and what infuriated them. This eagerness to please did not make him a hack or a dull and uninspired writer. Misha also understood that he had to convert his audience to his style and taste, because he did not equate enthusiastic applause with quality.

Misha had to reconsider and redefine his "doctrine of people's literature"; he moved away from a simplistic notion of the folk songs as models of people's literature. The diction and themes of folk songs did not help anyone, just as the secular poets like Waris Shah or spiri-

tual ones like Kabir were too different to be of use in the 1950s or later. As they were finishing their studies, Misha and his friends started looking for jobs. Some of them appeared for Indian Civil Service examinations and became high officials in the central or provincial governments. Others became historians, poets, playwrights or literary scholars. Some of them became school or college teachers. Misha wanted to find a job without compromising his integrity as a socially committed poet and as a politically sensitive individual. Having obtained a Master's degree in English, he wanted to secure a lectureship in a college while improving his craftsmanship in poetry and developing his own voice.

The study of English did not equip Misha with any verbal or rhetorical skills to write in Punjabi. The discourse communities in English shared little with those in Punjabi. Misha's stay at Punjab University College, Hoshiarpur, proved to be most significant for the ideas he encountered there and for the persons who questioned his views about writing. He was not a typical student who learned by rote to pass his examinations at the end of the two-year period. He was gaining insights into the social and political conflicts of the country after independence. Most of his teachers and friends fell into two groups—native nationalists and educated communists. For the nationalists, India was on its way to becoming a prosperous and vibrant country, while Misha and others saw no difference in the social, economic and political goals of the post-colonial politicians from those of the British colonialists. Misha and his friends did not find anything to celebrate in the economic and political policies of the Indian National Congress and had a great deal to criticise and condemn. Instead of developing economically, the country had become an appendage of imperialist economy. The post-colonial government of India was quite hostile towards progressive writing and afraid of the impact of ideas of social and political changes on the public.

By the time Misha received his master's degree in

English in 1957, he had gained considerable experience in writing lyrics in Punjabi, which were personal, emotional, political, gloomy, and moving. He had read them at his public gatherings and drawn a great deal of satisfaction and sustenance from the positive response of listeners. He could not imagine reciting a lyric that would not affect his audience emotionally or sentimentally. He was moving away from the empty rhetoric of feudal lyrics about cruel mistresses and exhibiting his tensions of love in a realistic context of the 1950's traditional and conservative culture of the Punjab. In the land of arranged marriages and bloody revenges, to fall in love was to court disaster, and to write about it was hazardous. Gradually, Misha began to formulate his aesthetic values of politically and emotionally charged writing and to base his themes on an observation of the social and economic conflicts around him. He began to unite his political and poetic aims with his personal goals and saw no contradiction between the two. He did not become self-centred or more a careerist; he was willing to take chances about his future. He did not opt for civil service competitions. He devoted himself to student politics, poetry readings and discussion groups on campus.

Misha accepted a lectureship at National College, Sathiala (Amritsar). It was one of the new rural colleges established in 1955. The faculty consisted of about fifteen lecturers, and there were about two hundred students. The college did not have an adequate library. Its student body from the neighbouring villages could barely read their texts in English and could not write except in simple and stale words and phrases. Since there was no hostel, the college did not have any evening life; students went home on their bicycles after classes. Although its rural setting was not to Misha's taste, he worked there from 1957 to 1966 and got some of his students and colleagues interested in reading and writing. One of his students, J.S. Kesar, characterizes Misha's method of teaching and enumerates the qualities which distin-

guished him from his colleagues:

There were other teachers of English also, but Misha felt inspired while reading out the poems of William Wordsworth, John Keats and P.B. Shelley. He quoted lines from Amrita Pritam, Bawa Balwant and other Punjabi poets. From the very start of his career in teaching, Misha had deeply impressed his students. He spoke his words with so much feeling that their meaning got embedded in their minds.

Misha's students responded positively to his emotional pitch, but they could not grasp the essence of these poets. They were thrilled that he broadcast his poems from All India Radio, Jalandhar, and they looked up to him for advice and encouragement.

Harbhajan Singh Hundal noted some of Misha's gregarious qualities, which had made him popular among students. Misha lived in a room upstairs in the College like a recluse and asked Hundal to stay with him overnight one time.

He managed to get a bottle of country liquor and related the romantic episodes of his early youth for a long time. His conversations were always juicy and interesting. He possessed the art of giving a poetic touch to his sentences. He had married recently. As we were having drinks, he showed me a trunk full of vests and underwears and said: "I was quite indifferent to my clothes. My wife procured a lot of them and told me to live like a well-dressed gentleman."

Misha presented a convivial *persona* to his friends. Self-neglect in physical terms was expected of a poet in the Punjabi tradition.

Misha kept up his links with students at Hoshiarpur. Harbhajan Singh Deol enrolled at Punjab University College in 1957 and explains the impact of his meetings with Misha on him and his friends:

Misha visited the College off and on in connection with poetical symposiums, get-togethers of old friends and functions related to student movements. In those days students were greatly under the influence of Marxist ideology and Misha was one of the exponents of progressive thought. He was deeply involved in a leftist political party. Nandi

and Surjit Hans were very close to him. Cheema and I were not exactly in their circle, but we took interest in their activities and shared to some extent their literary and political leanings. All this provided us much pleasure. In the College they talked about Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Majaz, Firaq and Kaifi Aazmi. My interest in Urdu poetry dates back to those days.

Similarly, he often visited Randhir College. Surjit Patar saw Misha for the first time when he came to his old college to judge a poetry contest. According to Patar, Misha "was the poet of genuine melancholy, bitter truth, and the little-noticed emotions of life." Misha did not stay aloof from the public affairs of National College and aligned himself with progressive causes. At one time, the students went on a strike, and Misha was the only lecturer who sympathised with them and openly said so. He would even join the students sitting on the grassy plot near the canteen. The college faculty turned against him and wanted to reprimand him for going against the management of the college. Misha would take his chair to a secluded corner of the college grounds and occupy himself with reading; he forbade his students to meet him so that they would not face penalties from the college. When someone would ask him about his isolation, Misha would respond in a philosophical manner: "Man lives alone in this world. He comes here alone, lives here alone, and departs from here alone."

Prem Parkash knew Misha in the late nineteen-fifties and stayed with him a number of times at Sathiala. He appreciated his hospitality:

I was then in the middle of writing a novel. I had plenty of time at my disposal, but there was no good place for my stay and no good food for my sustenance. Misha called me to Sathiala and I went there. He had a good house and a maid to cook his food. Milk supply was regular at his place and there was a good arrangement for drinks. Late in the night, Misha and I continued talking a lot about literature, girls and whisky. In his conversations Misha alternated between seriousness and playfulness

Misha shared with his friends whatever he owned. He

considered it ill manners not to offer his hospitality to anyone.

Around 1960, Misha started living in Jalandhar, a large college town, where he had many friends. Prem Parkash attests to his host's convivial and warm nature and his open-minded relationships:

He took me along wherever he met me. He entertained me lavishly with tea, food, whisky and betel leaves. In a way he was a picture of hospitality. My friends and I had been roaming about on these roads for the last six years. Mostly our pockets were empty. But his pockets were full of green and blue currency notes. These he had earned by teaching in private coaching academies and by tutoring students at a place as far off as the cantonment. This was contrary to our lethargic, easy-going and happy-go-lucky temperament. We were of course envious of his position. Apart from these green notes, he was interested in tuition for the sake of the girls he came into contact with and the lecturers with literary tastes that he befriended in these institutions. He could love those girls and convey his sentiments in the form of poetry. To the lecturers he could recite his poems.

Prem Parkash met him once near Company Bagh. While taking tea in Everest Restaurant, Parkash praised one of Misha's poems, "but he took it with a pinch of salt":

"Aren't you flattering me?"

"No, there's sincerity in it."

"Well, maybe."

Misha did not forget this incident: "Day before yesterday a friend met me. He praised me greatly but from another angle. He likes the ray of hope in my sadness. This he said keeping in view my new poems."

Surjit Hans confirms Misha's tendency to spend lavishly. He would lend money eagerly and never asked for anything in return:

Due to Misha's softness of heart, many people borrowed money from him. Perhaps it was on account of some sort of psychological block that he could not demand back his own money. I had never seen Misha in anger. To check

his anger was his second nature. Perhaps it found release in his waywardness or his sentimentality. I had influenced Misha and he had influenced me. He dedicated his first collection of poems, *Chaurasta*, to me. At that time few writers knew me. But his dedication proclaimed our deep attachment to each other.

Barjinder Singh, editor of *Ajit*, acknowledged these qualities: "He was keen on leading a good life and wanted others to lead such a one. He always craved for a prosperous and independent society. Whenever he went to a foreign country, he came back with new ideas."

His wife, Surinder Kaur, whom he married in May 1964, fondly remembers the various moods and episodes of her life with Misha:

During the last fourteen years I have seen him in many roles—going to the prison in handcuffs at dead of night, being honoured and garlanded in the official functions, fully knocked out under the influence of liquor, and absorbed in discussions in the company of learned persons. At times he became a child in the company of children, and amidst elderly persons he assumed the role of a know-all. Sometimes he squandered money like a prodigal son and at other times he went without meals like a pauper. He can cheerfully tolerate a big nuisance but loses his temper over a trifle. At times he is joyous beyond measure and then sometimes glum and silent for days together. In all these situations he never lost his faith in the goodness of man, nor did he ever become unduly pessimistic. Some persons tried to take advantage of his humble and affable nature. Still, he did not ever abandon his principles of reliability and tolerance. He could bear discomfort for a long time. He never betrayed his boredom even when he was in the company of boastful and egoistic persons.

Surinder Kaur also points out that her husband took immense pride in his friendships:

He had deep love for his friends. He often said that his friends were the achievement of his life. His friends love him and so do his female admirers. These girls are pretty and sweet. Some of them even tried to snatch him away from me, but I know they could not do so. He is mine and will forever remain mine. These qualities endeared Misha to

his students, colleagues, writers, journalists and civil servants. Misha was on the road all the time, going to Sathiala for teaching, attending poetry readings, and visiting with friends. After about eight years of teaching, he felt disenchanting with his job. He derived no satisfaction from his students because they did not share his enthusiasm and did not meet his level of expectations.

In August 1966, Misha took a big step and changed profession. He joined All India Radio, Jalandhar, as Producer (Punjabi). Misha preferred his work at the radio station because it enabled him to meet artists and writers. He widened his circle of friends and acquaintances among those who came to the radio station for music, songs, speeches and other concerts. He would favour a few of his friends by inviting them to deliver lectures or to do book reviews or make recitations at the Station. He moved in a higher social circle in comparison with his circle at National College. He met provincial government ministers and members of the legislature who came to the radio station for interviews. He still professed his progressive ideas and aspirations.

In 1970-71, when the Naxalite movement was spreading throughout the country, the police arrested him on dubious grounds. His friends testified that he had not participated in any political agitation, and he was released after two days in custody. Prem Parkash suggests that his arrest put a damper on Misha's sense of what he could or could not do. For example, Misha stopped inviting his Marxist friends to the radio station as a precautionary measure. He was apprehensive of a police case against him on flimsy grounds. His friends understood his difficulty and did not complain about his changed attitude. He felt unhappy with the severe restrictions his government job put on him. Misha often confided to his friends, "The radio service has made me inactive". By "inactive" he meant that he could not even express an opinion on a controversial subject. Misha's superiors frowned upon him for his enlightened views and his lack of religious or caste prejudices. Like the other colonial regimes, the Indian Government exercised

control over its employees, and nothing could be more dangerous than a free and bold expression of one's opinion.

Misha visited the British Isles, Canada and the United States to participate in literary gatherings and to meet his friends. In the summer of 1978, he made his first trip to England. He recited his poems in different cities. In Southall he presided over a meeting in memory of Professor Mohan Singh. Jagir Chauhan arranged an Urdu and Punjabi poetic symposium in Birmingham. From there he flew to Toronto and appeared in a number of programmes on the radio and television. The poet toured Los Angeles, San Francisco and other parts of California and saw the Punjabi community in Yuba City, California. He also gambled at a casino in Reno, Nevada, before going north to Vancouver. In September, he spent a week with friends in Providence, Rhode Island, and rendered a reading of his poems at Bryant College, Smithfield, Rhode Island. He visited the PEN Club in New York.

For Misha, one of the highlights of his trip was his meeting with Hardial Bains, national leader of the Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist), who had been one of his friends before his emigration to Canada in 1959. This was their first meeting after almost twenty years. Misha talked about his experiences in college teaching and radio broadcasting and expressed his view that, although he was not a member of any party, he whole-heartedly supported the movement for enlightenment and change in India. He spoke about his hopes and aspirations which guided him in his lyric poetry. Hardial recognized that active politics is not for everybody, and he stressed that it was crucial that writers reflected the contradictions and crises of the country in their poetry and fiction. Misha also pointed out that the Indian government had launched a campaign of repression against the people and reminisced about his own arrest on the fake charge that he was a Naxalite and a threat to the security of India. Hardial assured Misha that people will always value him and other Punjabi writ-

ers for their courage and commitment in the long struggle against tyranny and barbarism.

Although Misha had worked at All India Radio, Jalandhar, for over ten years, he felt unhappy and angry that his superiors had penalized him for his progressive ideas. He wrote about his problems in a letter to Joginder Shamsher on 18 December 1978:

I am not feeling settled as yet. I am most of the time in a wistful mood. You must have heard the sad news of Nandi's death [Anand Kumar Singh Ball]. This is very unfortunate but we are helpless. Surinder Kaur Misha has joined as Principal at Baba Sang Dhesian near Goraya. The college is good but the daily up and down is tiresome. In case all of us live there, the children's education suffers. As it is, there are many problems. The next day in the morning (Gurdial Singh) Mander telephoned me to convey the sad news. Jeet Singh Bhango returned home in the morning after a long race. He took a cup of milk, telephoned his wife at Chandigarh, and then left us for ever. After Nandi it was another sad news.

Jagmohan Joshi also died about the same time. He had emigrated to England and was active in Indian Workers Association of England. He passed away while participating in an anti-racist demonstration in London in 1979.

In the summer of 1980, Misha went to England to take part in deliberations of the World Punjabi Conference, organized by Ranjit Dhir and others, in Southall and Coventry. He spent many evenings with various writers discussing the nature of Punjabi writing by the Punjabis who had emigrated to England. He felt strongly the pain of living in the British Isles as second-class citizens and the unpleasantness of life in the ghettos of Southall and other towns. He resented the indignities the immigrants had to suffer. Misha discovered that much of the Punjabi writing in England was nostalgic and romantic versions of the memories of rural life in the Punjab. These writers did not attempt to confront their problems of living in the British Isles or Canada or the United States; they did not focus on the agonies and joys of immigration.

Misha felt a great deal of sympathy with the uneducated youth who were ill-prepared for living in British industrial towns and working in foundries. He also admired their endurance and their ability to make a life for themselves in spite of racism and violent attacks on them. Misha praised families for sending their children to school and university in England. But he also commented ruefully on the import of backward customs from India to England. He gave a few readings in *gurdwaras*, the Sikh temples; he could not help noticing that these temples had become centres of feudal ideas and corrupt practices. The Punjabi community had built no civil or cultural centres for the benefit of its members in any town in the British Isles while it had spent considerable amounts of money on places of worship.

Misha's social life involved heavy drinking. While hardly anybody consumed liquor in the Punjab in the 1950s, it became a regular feature of social life in the 1960s and on. No friendly visits would be complete without a bottle. These were exclusively male groups because women sat separately from men in the kitchen or dining room. Misha's large courtyard in his house on G.T.Road at Jalandhar was the scene of many convivial and intimate get-togethers. He would often swear off liquor and promise his wife he would never touch it again. Balwant Gargi remembers sitting in Misha's courtyard where his wife baked chapatis and entered into conversation with him: "Gargijee, you don't take whisky; please advise Misha to refrain from it." Misha took an oath not to touch it again and poured another drink before bidding it good-bye. His wife laughed and said: "I know your oaths." Social drinking never interfered with his job or his writing or reading. He managed to find time for his wife, his children, his friends, his relatives, his parents and his sisters.

Misha was denied promotion again and again at the radio station. According to J.S. Kesar, Misha felt so dejected that he lost interest in his work at the radio station:

Misha's heart was no more in the radio service. He became argumentative and was addicted to liquor. At times he himself created new problems. In his talks, [Jarnail Singh] Bhindrawale, Akalis, Congressmen, the extremists and the persecuted innocent persons surfaced many a time. He wept at times while discussing these matters but regained his composure soon. It was quite easy to see sadness in his face. It was not mere sadness but the stagnation of life. To be on the same seat for more than twenty years and having been denied the benefit of a single promotion were the main reasons of his sadness.

The radio administration kept putting pressure on Misha so that everybody knew that he was in a tough position. He could not leave All India Radio, Jalandhar, because he had worked there for two decades.

Misha's twenty years at All India Radio, Jalandhar, had not been a totally negative experience. It provided him with opportunities to see all kinds of artistes, writers, politicians, and scholars. This is something he would not have had in a college. He observed the impact of the radio on the Punjabi community and understood its significance fully. All India Radio was a major patron of classical and popular music, Hindi and Punjabi drama, Punjabi comedy, and Punjabi and Hindi poets and fiction writers. Misha was instrumental in preserving the quality of programming in Punjabi and in bringing the best to his listeners. Because of its crucial role, the government kept a firm control on programming and a vigilant eye on the outlook of its employees. Misha manoeuvred his way around officials and managed to do a few good things. The Punjabi community knew him through the radio and welcomed him heartily during his appearances at cultural events.

According to Prem Parkash, just two months before his death, Misha was very upset. A new Director of the radio station, who had risen to this position from the lowly rank of a clerk, was bent upon humiliating Misha. He found a way to annoy and irritate Misha by putting him in-charge of broadcasting the religious service from the Golden Temple, Amritsar. But Misha held his head high and

acted with dignity at all times. As Roshan Lal Ahuja puts it, "this person with a smiling face, charming personality and amiable manners remained a Producer all through."

On 22 September, 1986, Misha left home in the afternoon for a picnic in Kanjali on a lake at Bein Nadi near Kapurthala. He jumped from the boat into the lake and started swimming. Misha got entangled into the growth at the bottom of the lake and did not come up. His companions in the boat could not rescue him because they did not have the skills to help him. Misha's body was recovered the next day and cremated in Jalandhar. He left behind his wife, a son (Amardeep Singh Misha) and a daughter (Renu Misha).

Apprenticeship: English, Urdu and Punjabi Sensibilities

Misha had been writing poetry since high school days, and as he went through college education he concentrated wholeheartedly on honing his craft. During this period of apprenticeship that ended with the publication of his first book, *Chaurasta*, in 1961, Misha traced the history of the Punjab that had been a colony of one or the other power for over a thousand years and each power had imposed its own language on the people. He had to deal with the complexity of sorting out the paradoxical separation of English, Urdu and Punjabi sensibilities as it affected his writing. Like most other poets of his generation, Misha had to choose models of writing from Urdu and Punjabi. He also had to consider the appropriateness of current models in poetic writing for him and decide how he could benefit from English, Urdu, Punjabi folk tradition, and Punjabi metaphysical and romantic poetry. While acquainting himself with these peculiarities, he became more and more conscious of the range of vocabulary in Punjabi and the sound and rhythm of words and subtleties of metre.

Punjab is one of the regions of the world, which has been the target of foreign raids and rule since its conquest by Alexander the Great. Before its indepen-

dence in 1947, Punjab had been a colony of various Muslim rulers and the British for over a thousand years. Each conqueror forced the native population to learn his language. Anyone would be considered a barbarian if he or she did not master the colonial power's lingo. In practical terms, it meant that people had to study Persian under the Muslim rule and English under the British. Since the British authorities maintained their revenue records in Persian until the 1920s, anyone who aspired for a position in civil service was expected to read and write Persian and English. One of the oppressive premises of colonialists is that their language, culture and religion are superior to those of the conquered people. Under colonial education, students never studied Punjabi in schools until the 1950s in India and not even now in Pakistan. This restricted the use of Punjabi as a language of scholarly and literary discourse. Consequently the classics of Persian writers like Abolqasem Ferdowsi, Sheikh Sa'di and Jalaloddin Rumi and those of English like William Shakespeare dominated courses of instruction in the Punjab. During Misha's years in school and college, English was a prestigious option. Whether the knowledge of English helped anybody's felicity for writing in Punjabi is another matter.

Misha's work as a lecturer in English and his reading of English poetry took up lot of his energy and time, but it contributed only partly to his growth as a poet in Punjabi. In a sense, there was no link between the intellectual and emotional impressions he developed as a reader of English and what he acquired from his reading in Punjabi and from living in a community with a distinct culture of its own. The cantonment and the market place remained separate. The British colonial policy prohibited the integration of their employees with the local population of farmers, traders, soldiers, civil servants and others. The linguistic and cultural separation of the two could not be bridged. The sense and rhythm and connotations and denotations of words in English meant little to Misha because English was a remote language for

him. If he found two alternative words or phrases in Punjabi, he could choose one or the other on the basis of their usage by the Punjabi community of the Doaba region in the Punjab. But he could not make similar choices in English.

The separation has been aggravated by the fact that there are no translations of English poetry, fiction or plays into Punjabi. To read P.B. Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" in English is one thing and to read it in a Punjabi translation quite another. Similarly, Thomas Hardy's *Mayor of Casterbridge* and other novels are quite popular in the Punjab, but they have never been rendered into Punjabi. Students try to read them in English, but it is an impossible task for them because their command of the language is inadequate. They have no feeling for Hardy's syntax and no knowledge of his geographical references and literary allusions. At best, they could master the plot and little else. There has been a steady decline in the number of English readers in India since its independence in 1947, but its official status as a second national language has not changed.

Many teachers of English in India still take the colonial position that English is superior to Punjabi, just as English culture is superior to the culture of the Punjab or India. They contend erroneously that an English novel or poem cannot be rendered into Punjabi; even if it is, it will be so removed from the original that it would be worthless. One must read poetry and fiction in the original, or not read them at all. It follows that an English poem could not be translated effectively into Punjabi on account of its lack of an adequate vocabulary. Hence, the poorly educated Punjabi reader assumes or pretends that he can respond to the diction, rhythm and emotions of the original like someone whose first language is English. This delusion has persisted in India since the introduction of English in the nineteenth century. There is no tradition of training scholars in the art of translation from English to Punjabi and other languages; a few individuals have occasionally taken up translations on their

own initiative.

The argument about the inadequacy of vocabulary in Punjabi is an insidious one. The growth and development of any language depends on the range and scope of its social and intellectual discourse. By not using Punjabi, people ensured that their language did not expand its vocabulary. Punjabi scholars did not undertake translations. They did not understand that translations negotiate terms between the two sensibilities and explore and mediate the common grounds and differences between the two traditions. Translations function as a site of common understanding. The absence of translations means that a Punjabi reader does not have access to any poems in English and other languages unless he can read them in the original. Only a very small percentage of the population in the Punjab and other parts of India can speak or read English. Similarly, familiarity with T.S. Eliot or other recent poets does not prepare anyone for writing in Punjabi. Misha could not abandon his studies in English, but he grasped early in his poetic career that the appreciation of poems in English and their composition in Punjabi were two different processes. The aesthetic of English does not satisfy the aesthetic and emotional needs of a Punjabi reader, even if one may delude oneself into believing that it does.

The paucity of translations from one Indian language to another is also acute. There is hardly any translation of a Bengali or Tamil work in Punjabi. The speakers of Punjabi are alienated from Marathi, Telugu, Hindi or other languages. Very few travel from one region to another. Hence people have not developed a sense of cultural cohesiveness and national consciousness in the country. In many regions of the country, even Hindi has been rejected as a national language and has given preference to English.

Misha's command of English helped him in two aspects of his writing. He began to appreciate the role of the individual and his voice in writing. An individual should acquire a special quality of his own and put his stamp on his writing. Misha was especially fascinated

with lyric poetry in English. He knew Shakespeare's *Sonnets* very well. He also enjoyed reading the Romantic poets. One of his favourites was P.B. Shelley, who was a rebel and an atheist. He adopted him as a model for himself, even if he had no chance of living up to that image. Misha wanted to be a sensitive and warm person, a rebel against the exploitative system, and a keen observer of people's conflicts and contradictions. English writers revealed to him the need for improving his powers of observation and making connections between the personal and the general. He would note closely the distinctive features of an individual or a situation and describe emotions and scenes clearly and concisely. This assisted him in overcoming the vague generalisations and the predominance of empty rhetoric and emotional outpouring in Punjabi.

One of the offshoots of this colonial past is the emergence of Urdu, the language of the camp, allied to Hindi but with large admixture of Persian and written in Persian script. Urdu is a Persian word derived from Turkish "ordu" and similar to "horde" in etymology. Beckoning its Muslim heritage, Pakistan has adopted Urdu in Persian script as its official language, even though everybody speaks Punjabi in the Punjab. Misha's association with Urdu is also a complex matter. Urdu was the medium of instruction in schools during the period of Misha's education, and everyone took pride in reading and responding to Urdu poets. Quite a number of Urdu poets had built an enormous reputation as opponents of colonialism and as opponents of pro-imperialist governments of India and Pakistan after Independence. A cultural person in the Punjab in the 1950s read English and Urdu and memorised lines and recited them at social and public gatherings, and he would claim hardly any knowledge of writing in Punjabi or Hindi.

Misha could recite Mirza Ghalib, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Sahir Ludhianvi and other poets and felt moved by them emotionally, politically and spiritually, because they embodied the spirit of rebellion against oppression and based

their sense of dignity on it. Rebelliousness was the hallmark of the great poets in Urdu, and Misha placed Faiz Ahmad Faiz and P.B. Shelley in the same group of rebels. He defined his own sense of pride and dignity according to the romantic ideals. Regardless of confused judgement and evasiveness, Misha upheld this principle in private or public life. Under the influence of his critical reading of P.B. Shelley and Faiz Ahmad Faiz, he developed his social and political concerns as a poet.

Misha's knowledge of Urdu, however, did not resolve the dilemma of writing in Punjabi. Again, as in the case of English, the sensibilities of Urdu and Punjabi remained elusively separate in spite of the fact that the Urdu and Punjabi speakers belonged to the same nation of the Punjab and lived in an inseparable relationship with one another. Until about 1960, most of the daily newspapers and many of the books were published in Urdu in the Punjab in India. A person had to make a decision about writing in one or the other language. There were no translations of Urdu into Punjabi. A person would have to know Urdu to be able to read in that language; a reader of Punjabi would be helpless. Anyone who had translated any poem from Urdu to Punjabi would have discovered the differences in diction and rhythm, but hardly anybody undertook the task of comparing his response to the same poem in Urdu and Punjabi.

Consequently, Misha and other writers in Punjabi did not realise fully how they faced an unusual difficulty. They nurtured three irreconcilable sensibilities. They could assume the *personas* of Punjabi, Urdu and English readers without comprehending the psychological and emotional price they paid. This is not just a question of bilingualism. There are many writers all over the world who know three or more languages. They, however, do not keep each language in a separate compartment. Their languages enrich one another and enhance their skill as writers. The point in the Punjab is not that individuals should not learn three languages but that they should let their languages enrich their minds and expand their

horizons as creative writers. Misha's familiarity with Urdu most profoundly affected his inclination for lyric poetry and the composition of ghazals in Punjabi.

It may be said that, like many of his contemporaries, Misha wrestled with three conflicting sensibilities, which reflected his familiarity with English, Urdu, and Punjabi. By concentrating on his writing in Punjabi, Misha gradually liberated himself from the illusory models of English and Urdu. But this did not happen as a conscious process. The three languages ceased to coexist in his head as separate and independent entities. This exposes the crucial paradox of writing for Misha and other poets in a country, which had been a colony of the British and other conquerors for many centuries. One of the characteristic features of colonial rule was that each ruler forced his subjects to learn his language and dismissed the native language as worthless. One had to speak to the ruler in his language. Anyone who could not converse with his ruler in the ruler's language, would be classified as a "barbarian". A barbarian was "an uncultured or brutish person," "a member of a primitive community or tribe," and an uncivilized and uncultured person. The colonial masters had little respect or regard for Punjabi language or culture. The colonized people possessed no language or voice. Hence there were no translations from English to Punjabi to English. Even by the 1990s, this gap had not been bridged adequately, because only a small amount of English or Urdu literature had been rendered into Punjabi. The Punjab represents the culturally peculiar situation of the separateness of numerous sensibilities and the medium in which a writer chooses to write finally determines his sensibility.

In every culture, folk songs and other arts have a strong popular appeal because they embody something of the national tradition or psychology. A folk song has no known authorship and has been passed on, preserved, and adapted in an oral tradition before being written down or recorded. Folk songs usually have an easily remembered melody and a simple poetic form. Their very

origin makes them poor models for writing. Their usefulness as models is problematic. Their subject matter is syrupy sweet and their diction conventional. They contain little variety of metres and rhythms, which can be handy for a person to memorize, but to imitate them is another matter. This is true of Punjabi folklore as much as of English. The greatest danger lies in direct imitation of folk diction and rhythms, and Misha was aware of these pitfalls. It is one thing to recite songs during drinking sessions but quite another to base one's style on this tradition during sober hours of writing. Misha's particular concern was to be sentimental without sounding empty and hollow. He was not always able to avoid this pitfall. It took him many years to find a clear path of his own.

Punjabi religious and romantic poems also place hurdles in the progress of a poet, and Misha had to overcome them too. The basis of the poetry of various Hindu and Muslim Sufi and other mystical sects lies in medieval spiritual yearning for the divine and the poet's submission of his soul to the Almighty. Much of it is lyrical, rhythmic, and uplifting still, but it is not a suitable model for somebody in the mid-twentieth century. Its diction is too general and vague quite often, its experience too broad, its agonies too contrived, and its rhythms too traditional. It has little relation to the trials and tribulations of life in the Punjab after 1947. Romantic poetry of love in Punjabi suffers from similar weaknesses despite its popularity. It has little to do with the specifics of love and marriage, and it is not based on any reality. A poet complains about a hypothetical cruel mistress who is ignoring his most passionate pleas of total amorous devotion; in fact, she cannot respond because she is a figment of the poet's conventional persona. The diction of these poems is trite, stale and empty; their rhythms are traditional and old-fashioned.

Two factors influenced Misha's search for a meaningful and effective style for his personal and political concerns. They are his awareness of the limitations of Punjabi language as a medium for poetry and the need to

subordinate words and cadences to his subject matter. He rejected the merely empty phrase-mongering and stale topics of the poetry of dejected love and sadness. He did not want to be associated with the romantic and the nationalist trends in his writing. The romantic element was a residue of the medieval past, and the post-colonial politicians of the left had adopted the nationalist stance and right who believed that India had become genuinely independent of imperialism. Misha did not see any possibilities of improvement in people's lives under the politicians who had assumed the mantle of the British and continued the pro-imperialist and anti-people policies of the colonial period. He avoided both these outlooks and believed that he must find a voice of his own, which would embody the progressive hopes, and concerns of the people.

Poetic Journey

Chaurasta: At the Crossroads

After India's independence in 1947, lots of people were confused about the future of the country and had hoped that the Indian National Congress government would change conditions for the better. This optimism inspired many young persons in their individual ambitions, but it vanished fast with the passage of the nineteen-fifties. Misha's search for a suitable style had been made difficult by his study of English literature as a student and as a lecturer. He was a neutral/objective observer of the English language who could appreciate its subtleties and versatility. This reading, however, did not help Misha much in his own writing. A John Keats or William Wordsworth or Eliot did not prove to be useful models for anyone writing in India. Similarly, Misha's knowledge of Urdu became more of a hindrance than help. He simply could not imitate the rhetorical flourishes and emotional appeal of Urdu poets whose lines he had memorised and recited for his own aesthetic joy and that of his friends.

One thing that Misha's readings in English, Urdu and Punjabi prepared him for is the lyric mode which refers to any fairly short poem expressing the personal mood, feeling, or meditation of a single speaker who is usually a *dramatis persona* and not the poet himself. Lyrics are most suitable for emotional outpouring of love and grief. The most popular lyric form in Urdu is the *ghazal* which was introduced in Arabic in the seventeenth century and was widely adopted in Persian and Urdu. In India and Pakistan, *ghazals* are still a dominant form of expression in poetry written in the Punjab and other areas where Urdu is spoken. Misha's knowledge of folk songs also reinforced this tendency.

Punjabi has a long tradition of lyric poetry in the form of folk songs, devotional songs, political poems and love lyrics. They, however, make poor models for a fresh poet on account of their stale diction and conventional sentiment. Misha aspired to project a new consciousness in a distinctly fresh language. He did not want to support the *status quo* of a feudal culture. He sought to unmask that culture for its cruel disregard of the individual. Many of the political songs consisted of slogan-mongers. Misha's ambition was to launch something new and progressive about someone who wished to change a feudal-imperialist society into one without exploitation and discrimination based on caste or ethnicity.

Misha published his first volume of poems, *Chaurasta*, in 1961, and chose a title which reflected his own sense of having arrived at the crossroads personally and politically. All of Misha's work consists of lyrics which never exceeded a hundred lines and many of them are ghazals. He never attempted writing in any longer form. He expanded the thematic range of lyric poetry in Punjabi by going beyond the traditional subject of love and by extending the definition of grief to include any situation of life in an oppressive and exploitative society like India. He based his sense of grief in love on his own experience and that of others around him. Misha's lover was not a stereotypical speaker whose beloved always rejected him heartlessly. His lover fell in love with someone real and spoke of his emotions and grief in accordance with his situation. Misha equated love with general happiness and prosperity, implying that a poor person cannot have even the joy of mutual affection. He broke away from the traditional limitations of lyrical poetry and made it an instrument of a socially alert individual. The poet focussed on the link between his conflicts and contradictions and those of the public. Since lyrics were most appropriate for readings at poetry gatherings, Misha nourished his talent by gauging the responses of his listeners.

Misha is a part of the movement to find a new path,

as Piara Singh Bhogal stressed in his review in 1962:

Since 1930 Punjabi poetry has passed through many phases. The poetic creations of Professor Mohan Singh and his contemporaries bade farewell to idealistic and spiritualistic elements in Punjabi poetry. Instead, the trend has been to adopt realistic attitude in this materialistic age. The subject matter of poetry is more hazy ideals and divine love. It is concerned with longings, loves and the bitter-sweet experiences of a person of this world. During the last few years some of the poets of the new generation have endeavoured to break the bond of the make-believe world. Misha's collection is a right step in this direction.

These longings and love suited Misha's choice of the lyric mode for everything he composed.

In a sense, he thinks of the poet as a prism which reflects the colours or experiences of life. He himself is a passive medium. He is a rough-edged person without desires and without hopes of his own:

A guileless beam of pure light
touched my body
and I reflected
seven colours.

This power to reflect drew many "lovers of fun" to witness the show of light, but he did not possess any of the colours:

It was not
a manifestation of myself,
it was a miracle
of pure light.
None of the seven colours
was mine.

Misha gained some objectivity about his work by adopting the metaphor of a prism for himself. He is not distorting or modifying anything. Everything is outside him, and people gather around him to see the reality of their lives. He is not adding anything to this reality. The

speaker is not depicting anything in his own image. He is self-effacing and disinterested. The speaker is merely capturing in his lyrics the social and political scene of poverty and agony in a backward country.

By defining a poet in terms of a prism, Misha has distanced himself from the feudal style and begun to focus on his thoughts and sentiments as the body of his lyrics. His persona is not dramatizing himself or wearing a mask. He is letting the light pass through him and become an instrument of expression. But he is not a Sufi or a mystic or an ascetic who is enveloped in the light of the divine. He is not uttering words in a state of ecstasy or trance or poetic frenzy. He is an earthy creature delineating experiences of this world. This is the basis of Misha's creative consciousness in the lyric mode.

Misha sought to transcend the lightly felt emotions of physical and divine love. He adopted the realistic mode and reminded his readers of the harsh world in which they lived:

I don't say
the earth is a paradise
nor do I say
it will become a paradise.
Paradise is not a reality;
it is a utopia.
This life is a struggle
this burning piece of earth
thus flame.

He reminded his readers again and again in what kind of misery and confusion people lived:

The night is chilling
A spark smoulders somewhere
in the heart.
Feeling is benumbed.

It is dead cold
all around.
How difficult
how testing it is
to leave the crossroads!

The cold figuratively stands for the numbness of a person's psyche and his or her inability to overcome it.

The first piece in this collection represents the difficulties experienced by Misha and his contemporaries in their conflict with the country's medieval past:

In every respect
the night is very cold.
How difficult it is
to leave the crossroads.
My limbs are heavy
like lead.
The truth is hidden
under a black veil.
My understanding
has gone astray.
The dim light of crossroads
fails to show the path.
It is only an apology
rather a mere babble.
Death guards the city
as it is.
O heart!
Make another effort,
Knock again at the door.
Indeed, the chances are rare,
still an effort has to be made.

Misha is expressing here a real sense of confusion and hopelessness about his own situation and that of the community. All the circumstances are negative: cold, dark, tiredness, confusion, death. Yet he is not giving up hope. The chances of finding a way out of this pessimism may be slim, but an effort must be made. This faith in effort seemed to be the only ray of hope.

This poem reflects the conflict between the rhetoric of medieval poems and the need for a new style. This is one aspect of the crossroads. Misha could not easily break away from the past, because the past still dominates the sensibility of many persons. The source of pessimism here is the persistence of the past and its hold on society. What does the cold signify? Tiredness? Night? Darkness? Death keeping watch over the city? This is all a legacy of medieval India, which is holding people back and making it impossible for them to free themselves of it. This is the "debris" which can be seen everywhere in a city which sounds modern but is medieval:

There is nothing
in the debris of this city.

Hence "the present moment holds out all the promise". This city provides the environment in which people grow up with certain attitudes and ideas:

You are the product of
a city known for markets.
You are the resident of
a city having many markets.
In this city of markets
I am afraid
Your laughter may be
put to sale.
I am the son of a working man
seeking now a buyer of my labours.

Selling and buying characterise the marketplace, and in-

dividuals have to find buyers for their labours. In a buyer's market, individuals are under extreme pressure to conform to the requirement of the market and not to walk astray. The son of a working man knows that he must find a buyer for his labours, and Misha's vagueness about the identity of this buyer dramatises his dilemma.

Misha himself had gone through struggles to find a job and understood the humiliation and self-doubt, which resulted out of them. In the poem titled "Rozgar", he writes:

Humiliation, unemployment, vagrancy,
To go on begging
at the doors of the misers.
Every moment is like an accusation.
The sympathies of the friends
take the form of curse-words.
Accursed is the life
spent in penury.

Misha describes the deadly routine of checking the papers for job advertisements:

Daily in the morning
the vacancy page
is read like the prayer book
One doubts one's capabilities;
the heart sinks and shrivels
In the lonely corner.
The coin rings false
to my ear.

Unhappy with the social climate in the Punjab, Misha wants to replace the old with a new system by using the figurative language of a decayed house:

This house is loathsome
Its walls are crumbling

No treatment for its renovation
can be beneficial
The foundation has decayed
The beams are split
The roof will not stand
the torrential rains of Thursday.

Misha captures the emotional and psychic tensions of living in this decaying society and presents the kind of insincere social relations that characterise it. Surrounded by crowds, he leads a lonely life:

Every moment
things are making a headway.
A vast desert of loneliness is spread
on the threshold of life
To spend the day
in slow degrees
is like filling up a well
with single articles.
To spend the day is
like winning a battle.

It is Misha's willingness to state concretely the mundaneness of daily life that distinguishes him from poets who hide behind vague complaints. He delineates acutely the routine and courteous exchanges of life and sees himself like a pigeon confined in a well:

The day has dawned.
At the next bend
acquaintances and friends would meet
To say 'It's fine'
is like laughing at one's own
ironic comment
Life is like a pigeon
spreading its wings

in a deserted well.
What more is needed
if everyone's truly fine?

People keep up facade and conceal their sorrow behind the language of pleasant appearances. Even his friends do not respond to his ironic comments that reflect his peculiar mental state and his agony of discovering a parallel between his movement and those of the clock in the square:

Friends, we are very obedient
The feelings of life
we have bound
in the movements
of the arms of the clock.

Misha examines satirically the silly words of politicians and other public figures and discussions of general topics that do not get anywhere. These comments are as trite and pointless as the chewing of betel nut during an evening walk:

There are many things to attend to,'
the leader of the nation says.
'Stop these bomb blasts,'
The Archbishop declares.
The talk about the price of
the new crop of wheat.
The talks about the salary
of the younger boy
Overpopulation and unemployment
All the politics of the nation
and other nations
The betel leaf is being chewed
and the saliva spit out

The cigarette disappears in smoke.

The helpless individual meets friends and acquaintances, listens to public figures, comments on everything, and yet nothing changes. A person's life, like a cigarette, burns to nothing

According to Pritam Singh's view, Misha "is oscillating between faith and faithlessness", and this tension lies at the heart of his poetry:

This is an experience very close to his heart. This inner tension forms the crux of his poetry. The poet presents the modern complex man who needs faith. His poem "Faith" further strengthens this view. The poet does not cry or beat his chest. He just sobs. His tears are his ink. We identify ourselves with the poet. He wins our hearts. He is like the maiden who dislikes the lover who has jilted her. The realities are too cruel. The heart bleeds. This spiritual struggle never weakens the poet. Fire makes him supreme

This fire is not something ambiguous or mystical; it is the very passion that impels the poet forward.

One of the features of living under British colonial rule was that Indians could not maintain any sense of personal dignity or pride. The same lack of dignity has persisted in the country since 1947. There is a conflict between Misha's sense of dignity and the need for security:

My self-respect is now
the slave of someone else.
Still it is not possible for me
to ignore my soaring ambitions
for the sake of physical needs.

The someone else is the ruler who has succeeded the colonial master. A person must satisfy his physical needs of food and housing by getting a job or qualifying for a professional position. To lose one's dignity is to live like a slave. This poet compares his situation to that of Prometheus, a demigod in myth who stole fire from

Olympus and taught men the use of it and various arts, and was punished by being chained to a rock in Caucasus and preyed upon by a vulture. In a mixed imagery of chains and the eagle of memories, Misha tries to delineate his condition:

My life is bound
with chains
to the rock of sorrows
like that of the humanist god Prometheus,
Every moment
the eagle of memories
of the past days
gnaws at my heart,
It will not be satiated
till I breathe my last.

This comparison does not quite work because the *dramatis personae* feeling does not resemble with that of Prometheus. It is not clear what the memories of the past specifically are, unless one assumes that the speaker is being tormented by his memories of early childhood and carefree living in his childhood. Misha reveals here his failure to employ an image he had learned from books.

Misha is more effective when he resorts to comparisons from the *Mahabharata* and the idea of 'lok raj' or people's rule. These parallels work because they are literary and within the speaker's range of experience. Indian politicians used this kind of deceptive language in the decade that followed India's independence:

You are hopeful
in the age of the expected
Lok raj
the obligations would be met,
I am full of doubts
in the Kurukshetra age of today

if it put down arms
entertaining certain notions
no Krishna would come
to enlighten him.

Lord Krishna is a messiah who will not come to enlighten people about the false character of these politicians who promised to introduce people's rule under which everybody's needs would be satisfied.

Misha deliberately dismisses as false the tendency of some writers to invoke the ideals of Shakuntala, the daughter of a holy sage and the heroine of Kalidasa's famous play:

You are not the daughter
of a rishi
residing in an ashram
nor am I the offspring of a raja
who has lost his way
in the search of a deer.
We should wait at the door
of the temple of love
decorated with dreams.
Before entering into this temple
we need to be guided
by prudence and discretion.

To deny this comparison is to opt for a realistic relationship and to reject the illusions about one's social position. Misha brings together three words—dreams, prudence and discretion—that are normally kept separate by the naive romantic poets of traditional love.

A home is no longer a place of happiness and joy. The house is dark and the speaker does not wish to light a lamp. His dreams have been shattered. He is always angry, frustrated and in pain. He is tortured by mental conflicts. The speaker wants to demolish the old struc-

ture because it has lost every possibility of life and cannot be renovated:

Oh my mind
If never more
the wreaths of mango leaves
can decorate this door.
If in this courtyard
no one is to trace
colourful designs in chalk.
If this doorstep is now
at the mercy of white ants.
If no one is to pour
Canola oil on the threshold.
Let it crumble down
the sooner, the better.

The sequence of 'ifs' states the conditions under which the house can be saved and revived, but since these conditions cannot be met with the situation is hopeless.

Misha stood at the crossroads for a while and chose a path of realistic depiction of individuals who are dissatisfied with their lives, cannot be optimistic about their future, and do not have any way to find happiness and peace. His proponents are the Punjabis whose life has been destroyed by the political and economic conditions of the post-Independence India. They seek to bare their agonised souls and make a plea for social and political change. Misha has steered away from the sentimentality of the folk tradition and discovered his own style of plain diction and figurative suggestiveness. Misha places in an unborn child the hope of a world free from corruption, ignorance and misdeeds. He has a message for this child:

My wanton child
you are the message of my love

for the future.
You are the torchbearer
for our tomorrows.
For my present truth
you are the hope
of nature's kingdom.

A prominent Punjabi poet, Surjit Patar, sums up Misha's early work by saying that he had turned against the romantic vocabulary:

The magic of Misha's poetry lay in his chiselled diction and the authenticity of his experiences. He distilled his poetry by putting dreams and desires in the cauldron of reality. While reciting, he made each of his words ring and reverberate. He was aware of artistry, communication and philosophical musings. He did not express merely his feelings but weighed and evaluated them before putting them on paper. Misha is very close to the stern realities of life, apart from being deeply rooted in the soil. Misha had finally made a name for himself as a foremost poet of the Punjab.

Dastak

The distinct sound and individuality of Misha's voice can be found in his second volume of poetry, *Dastak*. He exhibits here a deep concern about the human predicament and contradictions in the lives of people like himself who work for a living and just eke out a living by coaching college students for their examinations. This took up much of his time and puts a drain on his energy. Misha dreads the old age which inflicts pains and aches on people and makes them incapable of taking care of themselves:

Drop by drop
my life is being drained.
This body will soon become
a part of the soil.

My mind is restless
as my life has all along been purposeless.

He draws attention to the lives of the workers in mills by drawing from Punjab history the names of Bhai Lalo, a worker, and Malik Bhago, a mill owner:

The big mills are grinding
daily
the bones of Bhai Lalo
but the owners like
Malik Bhago
never show repentance.

Like the rich mill owners, unscrupulous politicians also mislead the public by their words and do not improve the conditions of any village or town:

Once again
the adults of this locality
have cast their votes.
In this locality
The high-ups come
To measure their popularity
At regulated times.
This locality
Gets an uplift for four days
after years and years of neglect.

He invokes *Khwaja* Peer in another poem with the hope that his country would regain some of its classical glory:

Hail Khwaja Peer!
The well should again be blessed,
The curse should be lifted
Recast, rebuild and restore
the legendary well.

The people should come
at the place
Once again the original self
lush-green and dewy
beckoning the village people
to come there
with great fanfare.
On my part
I shall present at the altar
big cauldrons of porridge.

People offered flowers and other things at the graves of holy men having hope of finding happiness in their lives, but their hopes were never fulfilled. They always returned home empty-handed; the well stayed dry.

Misha felt desperate often and wanted people to give up their pessimism and do something to alter the course of their lives:

What is it that you do here?
Do you dread the open light of the sun
Or the inner silence?
You are shivering
in the chilly fear of your own self.
Unbolt the door
and come out in the open air,
else the door will be smashed down.

Overcoming isolation and fear is not a matter of subjective will. Misha knew that exhortations of this type are futile and do not affect anyone. If stern advice could transform a psychologically damaged into a gentleman, there would be no mental and emotional distress in the country.

Misha's speakers are disintegrating slowly and become robots in certain cases. They have become insen-

sitive, unsympathetic and cruel toward other people. Poverty, corruption, scams, unemployment, communal and religious hatred, and nepotism have spread through the country like an epidemic. This society is a jungle in the grip of a night:

Doubts, hesitance, hopelessness, and darkness.

Today the caravan people are greatly upset

They have no desire for any destination

Nor do they expect to have one.

There is dread not only of a plunderer

But their companions too are undependable.

In the jungle the night has fallen.

There is no escape for anyone from this night, because there is no clear goal; there is no ray of the sun to dispel the night. Roads are being built. Bus routes have made every village accessible. Farmers have tube-wells. But this is not progress:

Of course

there is much progress all around.

Yet humanity is shedding

tears of blood.

In my view

the offspring of progress

have no identity.

Likewise

the arms and armaments newly fashioned

no doubt

have an existence.

But where to?

What destination?

Human beings are exploring the moon and the planets, but even these scientific endeavours do not have a justifiable mission:

The world beyond the sun and the moon
New domains for man's colonisation
Worthless endeavours
Inscrutable missions
beyond understanding.
That is why the caravan people
are greatly upset.

There can be no progress or scientific exploration until there is social, economic and political change in India.

Love for Misha is an essential of life in any society. It gives him strength and joy, and it even compensates for the sufferings of an exploitative society. There is nothing abstract or otherworldly about this love of a man for a woman:

You
are the secret prayer
of my early youth
In the dreamy state of my mind
In the stillness of my being
I yearn for you.
Still I hesitate
to demand you
from the unknown
in the words articulated.

Love becomes a torture because it cannot be talked about with anybody else. It rankles like a hidden wound:

What to say
when it is not possible to complain?
To whom
should I talk about you?
Who would listen

and what would he say after that?
 To talk to others about you
 more revealing the well-guarded secret
 more condemning one's own self
 more like throwing prudence to winds.

This kind of imprudence cannot be helpful to the lover who must suffer his agony alone. Many protagonists in Misha's poems become prisoners of their words and cannot transcend their confining world. They cannot act or get rid of failure or futility. These words represent the feudal and neo-colonial culture that emasculates an individual's will to act:

Words have engrossed me
 Words are the ultimate truth
 Words have fascinated me
 Bored of my own existence
 Circumscribed as I am
 Within the borderline of words.

This predicament haunts many individuals in a feudal-industrial society controlled by neo-colonial powers. The words are the historical crib in which the individual has found comfortable living and cannot move out of it.

Misha takes up a historical character like Ahalya and depicts in her plight the persistence of ignorance, injustice and cruelty in the present world:

The blameless Ahalya
 remained under curse '
 for centuries.
 The beatings of the heart stopped
 the body was drained of breath
 the rejoicing came to an end.
 Still there is no end
 to the tears of penitence

that our eyes are shedding.
The blot is yet to be removed
from the face of the moon.

Punjabi feudal society still inflicts immense pain on the women who deviate from its straight and narrow path.

A person without direction cannot find a meaningful purpose and feels that he is chasing shadows:

Which shadow do I chase now
that gives shade to the blazing particle
The inner No
the utter negation
turns into affirmation for a while.
The inner negation erodes me
There is no shade
no patch to serve as canopy
over the blazing particle.

Misha avoids posturing and gesturing, which would be the favourites of a feudal hero who rides a horse and plunders the rich to feed the poor. He does not create a hero who indulges in mock bravery and can liberate his compatriots from despondency and despair.

Misha wants to write about what he knows. He does not imagine himself to be a saviour. He captures sensitively the agonies of working like a slave and a coward in an office:

The whole day in the office
He bows before his superior
Says, 'yes',
Yes he laughs at his insipid jokes
They all do thus
he wants respect.

This office worker relates to his superiors the way a

colonised person related to his colonial officials. There is no self-respect or pride. Misha enriches his perceptions of life by making these connections between the past and the present. In some of his light-hearted moments, Misha mocks the person who is cheerful about nothing:

What loneliness is this
Even the shadow is not there.
I sing songs of the garden
Not even a branch
belongs to me.

This is the plight of a colonised people, who are supposed to be happy even if they own nothing.

The tragedy of urban life is that there are crowds and noise, but no direction and no genuine sympathy for anyone. Everybody is lost in the rat race. There is no warmth of relationships. 'After a Party' presents a lively picture of a hostess's charming manners, artificial smiles, and shallow politeness:

You were too busy during the day
Now put off your sari
and wear a nightie
Remove the clip from your head
and place it in the dresser
Your neck might be tired
the party was alright
the veneer was good
You were too busy during the day.

Now that the party is over, the hostess should wear her normal face and show her real nature:

Let your face wear the expression
of anger
The oft-repeated jokes
the malicious whisperings

might have stiffened your ears
tired your painted lips
Let the smiles vanish
with the lipstick.

This is the life in the official world of superiors and inferiors, the top wife domineering over the wives of her husband's subordinates.

In 'Old Age' people assess their wasted lives and wonder about the kind of hopes and anxieties, which occupied their minds. They aspired for something they could not have achieved:

For what
we wasted our birth
we ran after
what was eluding us
we chased shadows
we were stubborn at every step
what to think of others
we could do nothing for our own selves
there was nothing ever to do
we lost our peace
what we did was in vain.

Their bodies have lost their spirit and are breaking down.
Their bones cannot hold the person together:

The earthen pot is cracking now
Breaths are falling like leaves
Soon dust will merge with dust.

There is nothing to look back to or to put positive value on the entire life of fear and worry, poverty and hardship. Isolated and desperate, they did not participate in any movement to change their lives for the better.

Misha avoids the language of agitation and

sloganeering. He does not want to write about something beyond his experience and out of his range. People's literature is one, which focuses on their lives and expresses their innermost feelings and emotions. Misha is not covering up anything, and his partisanship does not include the idea that he should write about stereotype characters and situations within an ideological framework. He expresses the anguish of those who have no language to unburden their grief and those who have been too damaged by suffering to see beyond their immediate surroundings.

Dheeme Bole

Misha's third book, *Dheeme Bole* (Soft Voices), is an anthology of some of his previously published poems. The theme of love dominates it. Love overwhelms a speaker's consciousness. Faithlessness, separation and other difficulties cause agony in love. Misha defines love in spiritual terms:

Love
means the elimination of ego.
Someone else commits blunders
but the lover apologises.

To eliminate one's subjective mask is to reveal one's true self to the beloved and to be accepted the way one is devoting oneself to the other.

Kach de Vastar

Misha published his fourth collection, *Kach de Vastar*, (Apparels of Glass) in 1982. It contains thirty-nine poems and twelve *ghazals*. Dr. Piara Singh recommends it without any qualification: "These poems are

the zenith of Misha's poetry. The depth of ideas, the flight of imagination, the sincerity of emotions and the lilting melody make this creation a great specimen of Punjabi poetry. Although Misha was born in a proletarian family and had its first-hand knowledge, yet he has identified himself in these poems with the life of the urban middle class. He has shown his concern with their problems. Due to this reason he is in touch with this class now. So in these poems, he has expressed the problems, desires, frustrations, hopes and fears, helplessness and dichotomy of the mind of a person belonging to this class. Since Misha had lived in cities from the days of high school, he had become familiar with the trials and tribulations of urban middle class that worked in offices or shops, earned moderate salaries, lived in cramped quarters, and struggled constantly with the pressures of city life. These people usually look down upon the peasants and villagers, with whom Misha had maintained his links. Misha's father lived in the village.

Urban life, however, has a deadening effect on people. People are insulated from their traditional culture of folk songs and dances and rely on the machinery of radio and television for their recreation:

In this heartless town
I carry within me
a cry
I carry within me turbulence.

Misha's exponent is restless and desperate:

Now it is difficult to control
Now it defies all restraints
The whole day
My thoughts are rampant.

This lack of direction compels the individual to lie sleep-

less. He wants to expose a false society so that he can get his peace:

Now I yearn to cry out
Standing near the courts
near Gandhi Chowk
I want to refine my spirits
I want to cry out.

He is totally alienated from people around him and does not trust anyone. He greets people with false wishes:

To all those on the right
He waves to those he knows
with false smiles.

The poet has lost his spiritual, psychological, ethnic, and national identity, and he does not look within himself to seek it:

On the fair body of the earth
on the pure white page
draw a thin line
as thin as the streak of cry
emanating from my heart.
Define your identity
to which side of the line
you belong.

This person is neither this nor that. He cannot choose between one side or the other, the progressive or the reactionary. This is the collective despair of a society without direction and identity. In the same way, the whole country has lost its way in the confused chatter of the politicians. A country like this should fall and disintegrate :

O God

If these doors are destined
to remain desolate
If they are never going
to be adorned
with wreaths
If this courtyard is to remain deserted
If the threshold is to remain empty
Then let it fall
let it crumble today.

Misha lives in the city, but he draws his powerful images of doors, courtyard and threshold from rural life.

This collection marks a high mark in his progress as a poet. He seeks to liberate his sensibility from constraints and make it vibrant with energy and passion. His poems embody the pain of his age. He has no illusions, so he castigates the corruption, falsehood and moral anarchy of the society. Misha is acutely aware of the helplessness and grief inflicted on people by feudal-industrial economy and culture. He voices his protest against this dehumanising environment. He still nourishes his personal note, but he enriches it with an awareness of social relations.

Misha is disenchanted with the trappings of middle-class life. The houses of the high-ups are decorated with such furniture and nick-nacks that they look like showrooms. Their inhabitants seem to be models that wear glittery clothes made of glass. Their glitter stands for their emptiness:

But if I myself
Become a part of the sundry items
displayed in an ornate fashion
in a decent way

But if these clothes
start using me
and command me to keep my size
to suit them
and be not afraid of wearing them
In such a case tell me
what should I do?

In a society, plagued by falsehood and hypocrisy, workers organise protests and march in processions. Some of them join the march, but others are afraid of losing their jobs. Misha portrays forcefully the psychological tensions of the people. They may not have the courage to jeopardise their employment by walking in a procession, they are fully aware of their condition in an exploitative society. The speaker is listing his hardships with anger:

The month begins
days are demanding
bills are paid
little desires are muffled
with great patience
I suppress myself
I put off my child
tell him to get shoes some other day
Each time
I postpone.

Misha satirises the politicians delivering fiery speeches during election campaigns. He ridicules their development plans and mocks at their totally meaningless rhetoric. The speaker welcomes a political leader when he comes to a small town for an inaugural speech:

The sweetmeat sellers welcome you
Sir

milk, butter

 the butchers of the town welcome you.

Misha looks at the hundreds of inflated balloons released by the politicians to generate enthusiasm of the public about their developmental plans and strategies, but he is tired of their empty words:

 How many times

 speaking in the election campaign

 Jan gan man

 Long live the national anthem

 I have felt restless

 at the silence of the mourning meet

 with great difficulty

 I have controlled my cries.

The politicians exhibit their sorrow at the tragic deaths of people in religious riots, but they are not going to affect anything:

 I know the difference

 between the official statistics

 the newspaper versions

 and the actual number of those who died

 There will be discussions for a few days

 They will talk of discipline and action

 of mutual tolerance

 of impartial administration

 of co-existence.

The government will hold a judicial inquiry and thus persuade the workers to end their demonstrations and go home. Politicians will forget the tragic events:

 A judicial inquiry

will call off the strike
How can people forget the tragedy
till the report is published?

Misha reflects the distrust, most people of India have in their politicians of the left and the right united fronts and secular and religious parties.

Sometimes Misha gets extremely angry about the curt and supercilious attitude of the politicians towards the public. He puts on the *persona* of a common man in rage who feels that the politicians are contemptuously treating him like a monkey or a donkey or an ignorant voter:

Excuse me
I am not a monkey
who will not see anything
who will not look at
all that you are doing.

He sees everything the regional or national leaders are doing in the name of national welfare and unity:

I am not a donkey
who will not see
who will close his eyes
who will not hear
I am not a donkey
who will not utter unpleasant words
who will hesitate.

In a state of anger, the poem persona even convinces himself that he will not become a blind follower of anybody or jump on anybody's bandwagon:

I will not dance to your tunes
beating the drums
at your command

in the din of clapping
who will dance with anklets
jingling
clad in a jacket
Excuse me
I am not a donkey.

But these feelings of rage do not reflect the real situation; people live in apathy and do not know what to do about the problems they face. Misha reveals the popular sentiment about the country's leaders, but unfortunately he is also aware that it will make no impact on the political scene.

Thematic Concerns of Misha's Poetry

Human agony is the major concern of Sohan Singh Misha's poetry. Modern man is at the centre of his poetry. With a microscopic eye, the poet views man's disintegration. The theme that seems pervasive in Misha's poetry is the process of urbanisation that is making human life mechanical. The result is that man has become insensitive, compassionless and callous. Urban life is fast passing through dehumanisation. The poem 'Momjama' very aptly illustrates this view. The nurse in the poem, without feeling, withdraws the mackintosh from under the dead man in the hospital. The nurse has no sympathy with the dead man's family; she is not touched by his death.

Thus, urban life has snatched from us our most cherished values. Our sources of recreation are mechanical—radio and television. Our self remains detached as can be seen in folk arts. Folk dances (*bhangra*) and folk songs now elude us. The four walls of the house now suffocate us:

In this heartless town
I carry within me
a cry.
I carry within me
a turbulence.

Sohan Singh Misha gives an exquisite artistic expression on the poverty, helplessness, directionlessness and inner disintegration of the middle class intellectual. Basically, it is a process of industrialization that has made man synthetic and artificial. The political leaders befool ordinary people with their sugar-coated speeches and humiliate the intellectual class. The intellectual feels

like rising in revolt against the politicians, but he does his best to suppress his feeling of revolt. He seeks refuge in drinking, and in beautiful figures. But this makes him more restless and all the more desperate:

Now it is difficult to control
Now it defies all restraints
The whole day
My thoughts are rampant.

This lack in direction compels the intellectual class to spend sleepless nights. He wants to expose the fake society so that he gets peace:

Now I yearn to cry out
Standing near the courts
Near the Gandhi Chowk
I seek sublimation. . . .
I want to cry out

But the tragedy of the modern man is that he can only think and think. It is beyond his power to translate his thoughts into action. Thus, in the poem, Sohan Singh Misha has depicted the tragedy of the so-called intellectual. This intellectual is boastful but in fact he is utterly helpless from within.

The modern man is lost in the crowd. He sees none but his own self. Life has become such a muddle that man is totally alien. In Misha's words:

To all those on the right
He waves to those he knows
with false smiles.

In the modern developed world, with all the scientific advancements and philosophical richness, the poet fails to decide to which country he belongs. Man has created around him so many boundaries and control lines:

On the fair body of the earth
on the pure white page

draw a thin line
 as thin as the streak of cry
 emanating from my heart
 Define your identity
 to which side of the line
 you belong.

The poet is terribly disturbed at the artificiality of the middle class life. The houses are so decorated with furniture and other embellishments that houses have become showrooms. They are no more homes. The people living in these houses look like models. The dresses they wear are the "glass vestures" (*Kach De Vastar*). It appears that not the people but the vestures are the basic realities. In the poet's words:

But if I myself
 become a part of the sundry items
 displayed in an ornate fashion
 in a decent way

—

But if these clothes
 start using me
 and command me to keep my size
 to suit them
 and be not afraid of wearing them
 In such a case
 tell me
 what should I do?

Modern man is engulfed by dark despair. He feels that hope has vanished. The poem 'Chaurasta' depicts this state of utter despair:

The night is blind
 all lights have vanished
 chill has engulfed

frozen all.
 How difficult it is
 to leave the crossroads

—

Those in chair
 Those with status
 don glass vestures
 Lest they crack
 they don't move
 but with scared limbs
 they sit erect.

The man in Sohan Singh Misha's poetry is the result of individual crisis, economic difficulties, new values, individual consciousness and social awareness. Another cause of this crisis is that his love is still beset with obstacles. This makes Misha's poetry extremely dense and full of despair. This view is expressed by Principal Sant Singh Sekhon in these words:

"Misha's poetry sings with notes of deep despair. His sky is clouded with despair. The flashes of hope appear only occasionally".¹

This despair is, in fact, not of an individual. This is collective despair. Modern man is in desperate search for new values. He has revolted against the old shallow values. He becomes despondent when he finds nothing and his search goes in vain. This despair and despondency is expressed through poetic persona or through some character:

O God
 if these doors are destined
 to remain desolate
 if they are never going
 to be adorned

¹ Dr. Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia, *Experimentation in Modern Punjabi Poetry*, p. 15.

with wreaths
 if this courtyard is to remain
 deserted
 If the threshold is to remain virgin
 Then let it fall
 let it crumble down today.

In this context, Dr. Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia is of the view that "the present-day youth (who is annoyed) is indifferent to the world of romantic idealism. He wants to face the naked reality. It may intensify further his moral turbulence. He is angry not only with the society, he is angry with his own self too. He groans at the failure of human ideals. He is aware of his weakness, inadequacies and his disintegrated self. In this situation, he cannot pose to be the romantic revolutionary of the Amrita-Mohan Singh tradition. Sohan Singh Misha's poetry represents an indifference to the concept of romantic love embodied in the self defeating Amrita-Mohan Singh tradition."

The letters of love
 you wrote to me
 are with me
 I have preserved them all
 not with any meticulous care
 They just happen to be with me
 They do not move me any more
 there is no warmth in them
 Whenever in silent forlorn nights
 I read them—
 they stir me not
 lull me not
 long waits had kept me restless
 For days and nights
 my heart was filled with thrill

with fear
As if god was sending for me
some song of joy.
These letters had once made
the postman an angel.

Another cause of modern man's mental agony is the on coming materialistic advancements. The developments in the domain of science have uprooted the old values. Man is now in search of fresh solid values that are constructive. Pritam Singh elaborates this point further in these words:

"New physical science has destroyed our older beliefs relating to the physical world. Everything appears to be in a state of flux. *Heisenberg's* principle of uncertainty has made it obvious that in the physical world, precept is a remote possibility. Old values, principles, social codes and patterns have crumbled like a pack of cards. Modern man has become rootless. He has lost his axis." Faithlessness has engulfed him. In Misha's words:

Which shadow do I chase now
That gives shade to the blazing particle
The inner no
the utter negation
turns into affirmation for a while
The inner negation erodes me
There is no shade
no patch to serve as canopy
over the blazing particle.

In Dr. Satinder Singh Noor's words,

"most of the time the poet addresses man. He rises above the personal feelings. He wants to identify the man who is devoid of the ability to become a hero; who does not cherish old ideals that give eternal meaning to his character. This

man lives with the crafty ways and inadequacies and the response of human life. Perfection is not the crowning glory of his character. The poet can see such a man more closely and more clearly as compared with the historical hero (Guru Nanak) in a more realistic way."¹

In fact, Sohan Singh Misha is a poet capable of reconciliation. The *persona* of his poetry is a decadent impotent man of the bourgeois class. In Gurbachan's words:

"Both at the individual and the artistic level, Misha is a poet of compromise. His outbursts often times vanish within. His criticism of society is directionless. Still, his rebellious voice survives and creates an orbit. His spirit does not boil up. It is frozen. This is the characteristic of new Punjabi poetry that the writhing persona does not lose his voice. He speaks. In Misha's poetry we see a tired coward, healing his wounds, in the form of a clerk who is alive to his interests. In this sense, Misha's experience remains confined to the sensitivity of an ordinary man. His poetry does not touch any poetic elevation which is an essential quality of intense protest poets."

We beg to differ with this view. A writer (poet) does not resort to sloganeering; he does not issue slogan-like statements. He expresses his sense of protest in an artistic manner. Therefore, it won't be appropriate to call such characters cowards.

As in other forms of literature, poetry also expresses the tragedy of the modern man. He plays the strange game of living by muffling his conscience for the sake of bread and coins. He is skilled in the art of flattery. He flatters his boss—he is his yes-man. He does it out of compulsion. He is helpless as he must do it to survive. Misha's following lines make it ample clear:

The whole day in the office
He bows before his senior

¹ Dr. Satinder Singh Noor, *New Poetry : Possibilities and Limitations*, p. 92.

says yes
 yes
 He laughs at his insipid jokes
 They all do this
 like him
 The boss wants this
 he wants respect

Dr. Karamjit Singh has such poems in mind when he says:

"New Punjabi poetry embraces the ethos of that culture which is crumbling under the burden of civilization. This poetry penetrates the human mind and explores with sharp tools the psychological complexities. Its quest is the quest for new equations, orders and combinations for human relations, values and standards. Thus it gives expression to the new man's agony and directionlessness. He is experiencing that suicidal moment of the disintegration of civilisation, which is very tense. His whole existence is in danger. It may explode any moment. But that moment never comes. Time is carrying man along with its currents in his state of mental stagnation and immobility. Human existence is without identity. It is like a lifeless automatic toy or a cog in the machine—at the mercy of time."

Modern man is detached from the human fraternity. His relations have become customary and commercial. He is being constantly reduced in the cocoon of loneliness:

What loneliness is this
 Even the shadow is not there
 I sing songs of the garden
 Not even a branch
 belongs to me

In his poem written after 'Momjama' and 'Dawat' the poet despairs over the unnatural aspects of urban life. The tragedy of urban life is that there is crowd and

noise—too much of it, but there is no direction, no real sympathy for anyone. Everybody is lost in the rat race. He has no time to look at the orphaned, grief-stricken person's face and express his sympathy. Urban life is pretentious. There is no warmth. People are formal. The poem 'Dawat Ton Baad' presents a living picture of female mannerism; the rosy lips with artificial smiles, formal meetings and shallow life-style:

You were too busy during the day
 Now put off your sari
 and wear nighty
 Remove the clip from your head
 and place it in the almirah
 Your neck might be tired
 the party was alright
 the veneer was good
 You were too busy during the day

The guests have left
 Let your face wear the expression
 of anger
 The bitter jokes
 the malicious whisperings
 might have stiffened your ears
 tired your painted lips
 Let the smiles vanish
 with the lipstick

This is a charming, real and wholesome picture of urban middle class life. Flattery, jokes, malice, parties, formal greetings, cabaret — all these have become an integral part of urban living. Dr. Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia very aptly says:

"Misha's poetry portrays the beingness of the modern man,

which is sensitive, wide-awake and rebellious. The poet employs symbols such as paper flowers, inflated balloons to expose the futility of five-year plans, and the shallowness of strategies. This technique of Misha is highly admirable."

The second major theme of Sohan Singh Misha's poetry is the feeling of commonness in the language, culture, religion and literature in the East as well as West Punjab. There is a spiritual kinship between the two. The Indo-Pak wars in 1965 and 1971 had further aggravated the relationships. Several poets in both the Punjabs have written poems on this theme. They are very forceful and touching. There is the spirit of integration and harmony in these poems. There is a strong yearning for love, brotherhood and attachment. This vital connection can be clearly seen in the extract from a poem by Malk M. Zamurud, from across the border:

These houses
their doors and windows declare
Those who have left live here
The people are lost in sorrow
at midnight
they descend the stairs
of their hearts.
O god
what has happened to our land!
these five rivers
are now rivers of sorrows.

The famous Punjabi poet Professor Sharif Kunjahi condemns those who divided the happy people into two parts. These people had a selfish motive:

The people with wooden heads
bend boughs
crush petals.

They abhor beauty
 they like leafless trees
 when some twigs grow on a tree
 they hang their heads in shame

Our poets — almost all of them — have touched this theme with vigour: Professor Mohan Singh writes:

Let us bury deep
 the feeling of hatred.
 Let us fill up the goblet of love
 Let us connect hearts
 take a leaf from Waris's *Heer*
 follow its message.
 Even today
 we are bound each to each
 by language
 by culture.
 How can we forget that Muslim mother
 who lulled her child
 first in Punjabi?
 How can we forget
 Farid Shakarganj
 who sweetened our language?

Poets like, Amrita Pritam, Santokh Singh Dheer, Surjit Patar, Dr. Haribhajan Singh, Amitoj, Faqir Chand Tuli, Harbhajan Singh Hundal, Kanwar Chauhan and Harijinder Dilgir have written several poems on this theme carrying the message:

O my Punjab
 Today I am away from you
 You fill me with memories- - -
 Your Sutluj
 Your Ravi

Jehlum, Chenab
 they all flow together
 my Punjab
 They have all separated now
 for ages they were together
 Today there is a dark spot
 Two rivers flow on one side
 three on the other
 I consider them all one
 they flow together
 O my Punjab

Sohan Singh Misha's Poem 'Dushmani Di Dastan'
 is worth mentioning:

When your armies
 laid down arms before mine
 it was like a grudge,
 an annoyance.
 You might have wept
 Weeping was a must,
 why I shed tears.
 My victory had filled me with joy
 I had grieved at your defeat
 I wonder at all this —
 how strange is the
 story of enmity

Here is an extract from Amitoj:

My uncle Bashir,
 the turban
 You rolled for your friend
 It can now

adorn my head any day
 (Father is in a very bad shape)
 I do not wish
 Those blood stains appear on my head.
 Consider this letter
 not a letter
 but a telegram
 Don't lose time.
 Reach home the moment you get
 this letter
 Ershad might have grown up,
 The one like me.
 in which class he studies?
 is he pursuing science or arts?
 I hope
 You are not sending him into army.
 Tell him,
 a long war is on here.

Surjit Patar's poem is also very relevant in this context.
 Here is an extract:

The new Punjab
 Days of hope smile on it
 Sorrow pierces my heart
 Guru know
 God knows
 Mercy be on all!
 Some traitor has entered my soul
 This Punjab of two rivers and a half
 A leader may call it Punjab
 I am not a leader

My Punjab had committed suicide
long back
when radio Lahore plays a song
Blood spots appear on my palms
I feel
the winds from east and west
are held in right embrace
they weep.

Sohan Singh Misha too has made the division of Punjab a powerful theme, against the backdrop of Indo-Pak war. His poem 'Tutte Dil Joran Di Koi Jugat Banaiye?' (Have you done something to unite the broken hearts?) makes it clear that the poet wants to strengthen the bonds of love, peace and friendship:

My annoyed friends
There is time
time for remorse
Let us unite hearts
make an effort to come closer
Cotton has the same colour
everywhere
Let us sing in our language
the song of Bulleh Shah
Let us sing together
Let us sing the song
written even earlier
Let us read
Let us pray to mother earth
to pardon us for our sins
for shedding blood

- - -

Let us share our joys
 and sorrows together
 Let us carry the gift of love
 Let us share the pangs of suffering

Sohan Singh Misha detests those who nurture in their heart feelings of hatred, revenge and acrimony:

This is what we have got
 This is what hatred has given us
 why we still carry
 on our sleeves
 the fire of revenge
 where is the need for thunder
 why to strike
 why break and fall

The poet in these poems has depicted the situations that led to the partition of the country, and mutilated our language, culture and mutual kinships. Misha writes :

What religions and all these illusions
 have given us?
 After all what are our gains?
 What have all these discriminations given us?
 Mothers wait for their sons
 in dark caves
 They wail with pain in their hearts
 Tears in their eyes
 Destinies are scrubbed
 from the foreheads.
 Bangles are broken
 People run from pillar to post
 in search of their pensions
 Mourning widows

carrying unfulfilled desires in their hearts
children are orphaned
before they are aware of
their surroundings.

The poet's desire to see and meet his friends living across the border (Wagah) is very intense. He writes them long hearty letters. He sends messages through winds, and weeps for them. His poems express his feeling for his fellow-beings:

The friend living in the strange country
what sort of friend he is!
I long for him
He seldom writes
sends no message
He never opens his heart to me
It is a small thing
Only I am becoming sentimental

Again, Misha writes:

In the moonless night
the fighters of my country
were marching ahead
sparing none
They were sprinkling fire on your city
I bowed before their fighting spirit
I prayed to God
to Allah
to Bhagwan
for your safety

It is love for the country or an old shared sentiment. Whatever it is, it is extremely difficult to avoid it:

Though a small thing

my son does not understand
 How can your own
 become a stranger in no time
 My thoughts cross Sirhind
 and are lost.

Sohan Singh Misha's poetry with this theme is highly distinct and significant. Dr. Attar Singh expresses his views on Pakistani Punjabi poetry in these words — "Pakistani Punjabi poetry announces the new possibility for the Punjabi language and poetry. It has the beauty of the love of the Punjabis for the land and its waters. Its winds and waters find their language in poetry".¹

It was Dhani Ram Chatrik, after Shah Mohammed, who talked of a common Punjab and common Punjabi culture. Chatrik had dreamt of a common Punjab. Modern Punjabi poets are keenly aware of their shared culture and history. On one hand, there is the human aspect. On the other, they talk of the post-Partition wars and the centuries-old common Punjabi culture. They are convinced that the partition, the wars, negate human values. They solve no problem and establish no healthy trends nor do they give any direction for a meaningful life. The sensitive poets like Thomas Hardy feel that the common people gain nothing in times of war. Thus, the anti-war poetry projects a global consciousness. It epitomises human sensitivity and a common cultural heritage. In the light of this analysis, we can say that the poetry with a shared Punjabi is the pivotal concern of Misha.

Another outstanding theme of Sohan Singh Misha's poetry is the socio-political awareness. The poet is keenly aware of the constantly declining political condition, religious prudery, sky-touching prices, rampant corruption, the problems of food, housing and clothing, social vanity, false pretensions of socio-political life. In Dr. Piar

¹ Dr. Attar Singh, *Samdarshan*, p. 78.

Singh's view: "The poet with his aesthetic mind captures the small incidents happening in contemporary society. He also captures man's realistic connections with these incidents. What plagues our society are the deadly germs of sick politics, communalism, nepotism, adulteration, economic disparity, black money, inflation and hoarding."¹

In a society plagued by falsehood and hypocrisy, working class in the form of a procession raises its voice. Some other workers wish to form the procession, but they are afraid of losing their jobs. Misha has very forcefully portrayed the psychological condition of these helpless people. These people are tense, in a state of conflict. Though these people do not raise their voice against the callous social values, they are keenly alive to the problems. They know well that in a capitalist society, the common man cannot get certain things as those are forbidden to him. This feeling is very intense in *Kach De Vastar*, the common man burns within:

The month begins
Days are demanding
bills are paid
little desires are muffled
With great patience
I suppress my self
I put off my child
tell him to get shoes some other day
Each time
I postpone

Dr. Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia expresses his views regarding Sohan Singh Misha's socio-political consciousness: "His radical political sense is confined to mere surface realities. It encompasses the entire socio-political set-up, with all its latent tyranny, corruption, deceit and injustice. It embodies the contemporary crisis."

¹ Dr. Piar Singh, *Khoj Darpan*, No.2, p. 186.

Misha has exposed the hollowness of society and politics. He has tried to reach the truth buried under meanness, falsehood and hypocrisy. The poet satirises the speech of politicians during the election times. He lampoons the development plans. He finds them absolutely meaningless. The poet welcomes the political leader when he comes to a small town during the 'Vanmahotsav' to deliver the inaugural speech:

The sweet-meat sellers welcome you

Sir —

milk, butter

the butchers of the town welcome you

The poet exposes the hollowness of developmental plans and strategies through the symbols of inflated balloons :

How many times

speaking in the election campaign

Jan gan man

Long live the national anthem

I have felt restless

at the silence of the mourning meet

With great difficulty

I have controlled my cries

—

I know the difference,

between the official statistics,

the newspaper versions

and the actual number of those who died.

There will be discussion for a few days

They will talk of discipline and action

of mutual tolerance

of impartial administration

of co-existence

A judicial inquiry
will call off the strike
How can people forget the tragedy
till the report is prepared

Sohan Singh Misha employs powerfully the weapon of satire. He exposes the social disparities with rare understanding, sharp perception and penetrating eye. In his poetry, he has left no aspect of society untouched. He satirises the whole society; he does not spare even his own self :

Excuse me
I am not a monkey
who will not see anything
who will not look at
all that you are doing
I am not a donkey
who will not see
who will close his eyes
who will not hear
I am not a donkey
who will not utter unpleasing words
who will hesitate
I will not dance to your tunes
beating the drums
at your command
in the din of clapping
who will dance with anklets jingling
clad in a jacket.
Excuse me
I am not a donkey.

In his poems such as 'Matt Dan' (Voting) and

'Udghatan' (Inauguration), the poet has satirised the politicians wearing crowns. They are foxes, selfish and mean. These politicians appear after full five years clad in white. They befool again and again those living below the subsistence level. With folded hands, they make tall promises.

In the dark houses of this *basti*
 in these insipid dungeons
 blows the scented wind
 soft as the lips
 the scent of promises
 lulling hunger
 pleasing the eyes
 the light of hope
 once again shimmers
 such a day rarely comes.

Misha is the master of satire. He strikes in a very subtle manner at the hypocrisy and veneer of modern living. With felicity, he removes layer after layer. He exposes the crushing prices. He also exposes common man's commonness, helplessness and the tendency to compromise. Misha is equally aware of the middle-class efforts to keep a brave face with the polish of hypocrisy, shamming and sophistry. His satire arms the falsehood of political leaders. It also aims at the victims of exploitation the poor who are not aware, who lack consciousness. The common man is sick of compromise. In this age of poverty and aggrandisement, the common man is totally disillusioned. His helplessness and social responsibility constantly restrain him from the path of protest, but his self is not fed up with shameful compromises.

I take my food
 while seated on the broken bench
 in some *dhaba*
 half burnt.

My stomach is here
heart there
with downcast eyes
I am a witness to the legitimate protest
I measure my strength.
From here to the crowd there
the distance is not long
it is just equal to my
sense of shame

How long
you will be safe?
They say safety saves.
You will erode
under the burden of restraint
How long
after all
how long
you will keep to the left?

Sohan Singh Misha has portrayed high officials in his poems who are flattered by sycophants. The poet intensely feels the modern man's selfishness, opportunism and false disposition. In a pungent vein he shows how shallow, dwarfish and self-centred the present day man has become:

The whole day in the office
He bows before his senior
Says yes
yes.
He laughs at his insipid jokes.
They all do this
like him.

The boss wants this
he wants respect

Misha has a deep understanding of the hollowness of the political system. He knows the political leaders from very close quarters. His experience is quite mature and seasoned :

The train is about to reach
A great person is about to arrive
He will be amidst us soon
Leave your work
It does not augur well
The sentinels of the town are dozing
The fishy business goes on
in the shimmering lights.

Sohan Singh Misha has raised his voice in favour of the down-trodden, suppressed working class. He has also exposed the sin committed in the name of caste and religion. He has described in his poems how the rich factory-owners exploit the poor for their comforts :

In big factories and mills
they grind the bones of
Bhai Lalos
and Malik Bhago is
least repentant.

Misha has very prominently depicted in his poems the agony of his countrymen. We can have a full view of their plight, and can peep into their inner psyche. We identify ourselves very easily and naturally. Our sympathies are aroused. Misha is not presenting the mere surface. He penetrates and sees through. The picture he paints becomes a shared experience. This is of lasting nature. He in this manner lights the path. The following extract from his poem is quite apt:

My half-starved stomach

lies here
 My heart there
 with downcast eyes
 I am a witness to
 the righteous protest

The extract makes it clear that the poet is not unaware of any social move. He is keenly alive to the whole social ethos. Quoting Dr. Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia:

"Misha's sensibility does not enter the domain of romanticism or spiritualism after it has experienced the journey from mental dilemma to the existentialist state. Instead, the poet shows strong leanings towards the socio-political realities. His sensibility evolves a palpable frame work that indicates direction. The poet is conscious of his surroundings. He is alert and keenly aware. This is evident in *Soch Kangri*. He does not overlook — he is alive to what goes on around him. He can be harsh and sarcastic as well. Misha's poetic *persona* in *Kach De Vastar* dreads erosion. For self-safety, he keeps to the left. But there is tension in his mind, an interrogative mark—"After all, how long?" On one hand, there is tradition. On the other hand, the social, moral and political institutions expect tight-jacket behaviour from man, as is clear in *Kach De Vatsar*. When this *persona* peeps within, he feels that he is disintegrated. His stomach (hunger for food) has its own demands. He is torn between duty and thought. The grasp of realism forbids him to become irresponsible."

Misha expressess his views about the social division, economic disparities and the exploitation of the labour class. What he wants to say is that in the reconstruction of the country, the people who really suffer and are atrophied are those who sacrifice everything, who give their blood to the country. Alas, the fruits of their labour are enjoyed by the idlers :

I have seen people

sleeping on foot paths
they are those
who raised skyscrapers
There are always two classes
in society
What the men of religion say
is not true.

Further more unemployment is a curse. The search for job disintegrates a man. It dissipates man, makes him sapless. Sometimes, man becomes self-doubting. In his poem "Employment", the poet writes:

Humiliation
Idleness
Vagrancy
Each moment is like an accusation
Friendly sympathy is like reprimanding
My breath goes waste without money
Each day I read the page of needs
as a religious routine
I doubt myself
my heart sinks
and my soul trembles
The coin in my hand
turns out to be
a forfeited coin.

The above quoted lines speak volumes of Misha's socio-political consciousness. Innocent people are befooled. False slogans are raised. The youth humiliated in the employment offices, inaugural ceremonies during the *vanmahotsava* (tree planting) functions, voting, false consolation, the illusion of democracy, rotten

systems and the hypocrisy of political leaders — all these evils are exposed in Misha's poetry. Dr. Sadhu Singh opines:

"Misha's poetry does not claim to realise the higher truths of life. He depicts, instead, everyday life. He is the poet of the middle-class man who is crushed under the burden of dreams, desires, yearnings, needs, hesitations, sorrows and joys, and unfulfilled desires. The pain of the partition is fresh in Misha's mind. He is all the more disillusioned with the communal tensions". One can easily discern the reflections of all this in some of his significant poems :

The chains were broken long back

The limbs are still swollen

The battle is on

The curse is not yet lifted

Only a few dreams are fulfilled

Hunger is writ large on faces

Dust has settled on them

Shadow falls between

desires and thoughts.

The Experience of Love

Love is a real feeling which binds man and makes the whole mankind supreme. This primal feeling lights up dark paths and leads man to perfection. Love is an inspiring force behind all great scholars, thinkers, writers, artists and great men. Love may have several dimensions — love for women, love for the mother, love for nature and love for God. But to manifest love, medium is required. It can be in any form through which love expresses itself. Kahlil Gibran writes :

“Follow it when love beckons you. The path may be beset with grave dangers. When love seeks to take you in its fold, surrender yourself. The hidden dagger in the folds of love may injure you. Heed not. When love is in communion with you, show full faith. It may shatter your dreams. Storms damage gardens. Love will put a crown on your head. It will also crucify you. This is Love's privilege. Love is for your growth. It will also prune you. Love does all this so that you discover the secret of life. Through this knowledge you relate yourself with love. Love seeks nothing but perfection. If love stirs your heart, pray, Make me a divine ghost. Fill me with compassion, mercy, kindness. Let me flow like a river. Fill my nights with songs. I am ready to offer everything at the altar of Love — my blood. May I spread my wings and soar? May I welcome the rising sun?”¹

Sohan Singh Misha's poetry is no doubt dominated by themes of global nature. His other poetic concerns include black-marketing and corruption. The theme of love has got equal importance. In the beginning, he followed the modern poets and declared that the letters of the beloved had no warmth in them. They could not

¹ Kahlil Gibran *De Bachan*, p. 63-64.

stir him, they were powerless. They could not make him restless. But such statements are self-contradictory. His books *Dastak* and *Kach De Vastar* do have poems which make it clear that love is Misha's basic theme. The following extract from a song reveals the implorings of the beloved :

Stay near me
for a while
You passer-by
Stay !
Let me remove
the dew of perspiration
from your face.

Words of love give peace to the soul and cool the burning heart of the lover. He forgets the bitterness of life. He even forgets life and death. In his poem *Wafa*, Misha writes :

Don't enter into these
life-long pledges
This heart is not ever obedient
All say in the beginning—
We will live together
We will die together
A sweet utterance like yours
used to make me oblivious
of the bitterness of life
It used to penetrate
the dark regions
and usher in shimmering rays

Life and death
used to pale into insignificance
The lulling shade of love
the glimpse of beauty

We could peep into
the divine "city of palm trees"

Sohan Singh Misha is distinctive in his expression of love. The pain of unfulfilled love is the central concern of his poetry. But his vision is always optimistic. Love enriches man so much, stirs him to the extent that he comes to question what else he wants from life? He feels that he has found the secret of life :

As though
existence has found meaning
sympathies are widening
There is no enemy
no stranger,
The soul is nearing perfection
Everything seems beautiful
an image appears
out of the maze of lines
The canvas has got colours
The bend of the road
will lead to the goal now.
I wonder at my life
it has become a mosaic of purpose.
Your eyes have made life
a sequence of dreams —
Life is now bathed in dreams
Pray this illusion never shatters
The miracle never vanishes
The fathomless remains
fathomable.

The experience of love has the tinge of the feeling of separation. It is quite apt to observe here that Misha's poetry is an expression of eternal agony, waiting and

directionlessness. The moments of meeting are momentary. The resplendent dreams of love shatter in no time. Sweetness changes into bitterness :

The letters of love —
you wrote to me
are with me
I have preserved them all
not with any meticulous care.
They just happen to be with me
They do not move me any more
There is no warmth in them
Whenever in silent forlorn nights
I read them —
they stir me not
lull me not
long waits had kept me restless
for days and nights.
My heart was filled with thrill
with fear
As if God was sending for me
some song of joy.
These letters had once made
the postman an angel.

Failure, dissatisfaction, search and lack of direction in love open up new vistas in Misha's poetry. These traits are not only confined to the experience of love. A sensitive poet experiences faithfulness as an essential experience of life. Sometimes he feels life has a meaning. But moments come when meaning eludes man:

Incidents occurred
they did their best
but no incident turned into an experience

thoughts surged in the mind
like wind through the reeds.
Life sizzles without faith
there is no direction
no movement
no purpose.
Heart is ablaze in erosion
yearning and pain.
None is transformed into duty
I heard much
tasted much
saw enough
but sifted *nothing*.
The crazy heart wanders on roads
picking up shreds of papers
It tries to piece them together
but the sequence does not build up
What message !
life is scared.

Sohan Singh Misha's poetry is a unique blend of the sorrow of the world and the sorrow of the beloved. When social consciousness raises its head, those forces are easily identified that create hurdles in the path of lovers :

Today again
Heer will go with Saida
Today again
Dheeda will be left *grazing the cattle*

To settle down to write a letter
on occasions

to discuss little things
sitting in a garden
or in a restaurant.
It is difficult to do all this
Suspicious eyes have
created a net
all around

The mighty rocks blunt the blade
But Farhad will always think of
talk of
the milky rivulets.

The experience of waiting and wandering in love
finds a unique expression in Misha's poetry :

You may not remember my face
even today
the dust under your feet
is like *kajal*
The road that goes to
my beloved's villages
should see
how eagerly my eyes wait for her.
Now
my eyes will not settle on
anything else
they have seen you.

We can conclude that love experience may not be Misha's primary poetic concern, but it is certainly occupying secondary place in his poetry. The love experience has the rich dimensions of waiting, union and separation. Each poem is a yearning, a pain, a tragedy. It is an experience to fill the void.

The Artistic Modes in Misha's Poetry

Misha uses many soft and pliable words which enhance the appeal of his poems. He is adept in making use of the compound words. These are not the hackneyed expressions but fresh and novel, e.g., *rang-heen*, *poh-phutale*, *man-gharat*, *sutt-uneendi*, *hathiar-vihuna*, *chinta-dange*, *uho-gholde*, *peer-paruchi*, *soch-kangri*, *lahu-palatha*, *cheek-bulbuli*, *ving-valewen*, *deftri-meeting*, *bekirk-shehar*, *chulan-dhilli*, *jag-raham*, *jag-bhiran*, *sunm-masana*, *pawan-chakkian*, *gandh-chatrawa*, *gandh-potli*, *mor-pankh*, *chanan-viguchi*, *jag-sanjhan*, *mirg-jalan*, *birchh-vihune*, *sheesh-mahal*, *rein-basera*, *dhun-sarape*, *jag-rachna*, etc.

These compound words on the one hand are the specimens of the poet's creative power and, on the other, they have streaks of irony in them. Besides, these compound words depict discipline and awareness. To his readers these compound words hold great charm and felicity. The close scrutiny would reveal that Misha, who generally avoids signs and symbols used by the earlier poets, makes use of such a terminology as lends great charm and fascination to his poetry. Another beauty of his diction lies in the irony inherent in it. He is the only Punjabi poet whose apparently light-hearted tone conveys deeper meanings. He satirizes the activities of the robot-like modern man living in this machine age. With the object of creating wonderful things, the man of today violates the laws of nature and, in return, becomes a slave to his own creations. Mostly, the poet comments in an ironic manner on the hypocrisy and false show of the persons belonging to the middle class :

In this city
people do wear clothes
rather the clothes wear bodies.

The clothes are cut
and adjusted
To the sagging bodies
or
We have grown very powerful
very swift-footed
capable of flying high
to touch new pinnacles.
But we have lost
the capacity to relax
in warm-sunshine
and cool shades.

Dr. Randhir Singh Chand is of the view that in *Kach De Vastar*, the poetic diction of *Chaurasta* and *Dastak* is very much in use but the poet has gradually become more satirical. In the poems like — *Dawat Ton Baad* (After the Party), *Cabaret Ton Baad* (After the Cabaret Show), *Momjama* (Mackintosh), *Vithh* (Gulf), *Aakhar Kadon Takk* (Till When) etc., irony is apparent. Misha is glad to realise that he many a time succeeds in making fun of himself as a *persona* in the poem. This monologic style helps in bringing the reader close. Another class also comes under the ambit of his irony and that is the careerist class. He makes such persons the butt of his satirical comments as consider themselves lucky when they achieve success in small measures or when their anxieties are resolved without great efforts. In a very scientific manner, he makes fun of the common people, who are the victims of small considerations, in the poem 'Shubb Ichhawan' (Good wishes), he addresses such friends :

In this year
from home to office
from office to home
you should catch bus daily

early in the morning
without standing for long
in the queue.
You may not face
any hardship
in the new year !
Moreover —
the A.C.R. this year should be good
the official residence
near the office
out of the quota
would be a boon,
the son should get employment
and the daughter
a well-to-do companion.

Satire becomes effective only when the satirist has not aligned himself with a particular party. Otherwise the satire aimed at his opponent would become ineffective. It may descend even to the level of vituperation. This way, it will fall down from its higher pedestal. Misha's satire being fair and unbiased assumes the position of an effective poetic device. His satire is natural and uncompromising.

Dr. Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia, while praising this poetic mode of Misha, says: "Sometimes he makes ironic comments on the 'Jai ho, Jai ho' of *Jan Gan Man* sung at the end of speech in an election rally. At another time he makes the worthlessness of our plans and schemes the butt of his comments. In the campaign for growing more trees when the honourable citizen visits Nimaane Nagar, the poet's satiric arrow strikes at the hollow claims of the staticians. Likewise, Misha is unsparing in the expression of his distaste for the slavish copy of the western culture in the form of exotic dresses, half-clad bod-

ies, bobbed hair and intoxicated beings in fashion shows. The poet is in fact devastating in his comments on the hollowness of the modern way of life. Dr. Karamjit Singh says: 'Misha's satire is aimed at correcting the wrong tendencies in the society. He in a way longs for unmasking the true face of human beings who strut about on the stage of life as in a masquerader'. His satire is not acidic but genial and corrective :

The true picture
of the western culture
A hippie girl intoxicated
lying naked on the road.

The guests have departed
dear
let your forehead be covered
with frowns.

Undoubtedly satire is a special feature of Misha's poetry.

From the point of view of prosody, his entire poetry is in free verse. He uses different metrical compositions for expressing different moods and attitudes. All this is in a planned manner and with telling effect. Moreover, the inner melody of his verses, in strong contrast to the prevalent style of other poets, enhances its effectiveness. Dr. Kulbir Singh Kaang opines : "The new poetry can be recognised by its inner melody. Words and emotions have their own cadences which are not easily comprehended by the critics. The conscious reader has an ear for this celestial music. Every word has a soul of its own. In its articulation can be sensed the reverberations of the sonata. The emotions too have a melody of their own. This melody is the product of the new symbolic patterns. New thinking also goes a long way in producing it."

The aesthetic aspect of Misha's poetry can be recognised in his poetic modes. He believes in metrical forms and reveals himself to his readers as a master craftsman. He is fully conscious of the musical charm of the words. Similes and metaphors, which he uses in a masterly manner, add a new dimension to his compositions. The undertones in his expressions deeply impress the readers. The style that he adopts in composing his verse conveys their inherent meanings spontaneously. In his ghazals too he has avoided the hackneyed themes and modes of expression. His endeavour has been to convey fresh ideals effortlessly. In this way he rubs his shoulders with such exponents of ghazal as Gurdev Nirdhan. He is capable of conveying human emotions and feelings in an artistic manner. S.S. Misha is a prominent Punjabi poet. The originality and simplicity of this aesthetic poet is significant. The sincerity of his experience and the beauty of his expression add a new dimension to his creation.

Sohan Singh Misha is dramatic in his poetic expressions. He suddenly picks up a point in a situation, or starts the poem in the form of a monologue. Else he depicts the action of the protagonist effortlessly. Dr. Harbhajan Singh has also created such dramatic situations, such as :

What you have said
just now
at my back
is true
but it is still
unborn

In Sohan Singh Misha's poetry too such dramatic moments are present :

I remember what
Nadu Chhera had said.
He had been allowed

by the village folk
to emit one or two loud cries
daily in the evening.
In the gathering of the folk
he had admitted
quite meekly
his aberration.
But at the same time
he prayed for indulgence
as he considered
the womenfolk of the village
his sisters and daughters.
In the evening
after a peg or two
his heart felt oppressed.
At that time
a long cry
escapes his lips suddenly.

Misha's poems depict human values through easy to comprehend poetic devices. He adopts the method of direct dialogue to instill consciousness among the people, to make them aware of their self-respect and to channelize their anger. His dialogue is with two types of persons : one is concerned with his child and the other with the people in India and Pakistan who have been divided by the nefarious designs of the politicians, e.g. :

O' friends estranged
there is still time
to feel repentant.
Let's ponder over
some scheme
to rejoin the broken hearts.

O' my restless child
you are the message
of my love
for the dreams for tomorrow.
You also stand for
the reality of the present moment.

Symbolism is the foremost quality of modern poetry. Dr. Nagendra is of the view — "Symbol is not an unknown thing for the Indian poetics. But the form in which it has been used in the Western literature is not prevalent in the Indian poetics."

The poet of today talks about many things which are a part of his vast experience. With the power of his imagination, he creates such word-pictures and images which assume new meanings in the minds of his readers. The word-pictures born of experience, imagination, metaphors and personifications are very impressive. According to Dr. Dewan Singh, an ordinary poet would think in terms of ordinary images. But a great poet would take recourse to images having extraordinary appeal.

In the world of Punjabi poetry, symbols and images have been in vogue since the days of Baba Farid. But they have become the integral part of contemporary Punjabi poetry. Dr. Attar Singh says — "Punjabi poetry is succeeding in making itself noticeable. New poetic devices have also come into vogue alongside the time-tested ones. Poets such as Dr. Harbhajan Singh, Tara Singh, Jaswant Singh Neki and S.S. Misha hold great promise to the future of Punjabi poetry. They are aware of imagery and symbolism, besides being conscious of the new possibilities of the language. They have great self-confidence in themselves."

Sohan Singh Misha has created numerous fresh and original symbols in his poetry. His symbolism has received further strength due to his vast experience of life and its understanding. His imagery can be categorised as such : i) visual images ii) tactile images iii) auditory

images iv) olfactory images, and v) traditional images.

Visual image is concerned with eye-sight. That is why it is said that whatever is seen by the eyes is never forgotten. There is no doubt that its impression on our mind is everlasting. In Misha's poetry there are a number of visual images worth taking notice of:

In the night
dark and dreary
the brave soldiers of
my country
marched forward in full glory
setting your city ablaze

On the day of Holi
the fair is in full swing
after taking *sukha*
the Nihangs play *gutka*

It was all glow
but no fire
when I took the glow-worm
in my hands

Whose san is spread
for drying up
the parapet is well-decorated?

Auditory image is concerned with our hearing power. The sounds of the outside world strike against the sensitive membranes of our ears. In this way are created such vibrations as are at once unique and mysterious. These are received unmistakably by the ears. The human mind continues to be in a state of rapture for long :

Hearing the music of the *Been*
The cobra raised its hood.
At once it occurred to me
that it's now well-poised
to strike. .
At night
the dew-drops were frolicking
with the branches.
The *Koils*
poured their hearts into the songs
perched on the branches
covered with soft leaves.

You expect me
to dance to your tunes
in the traditional apparel?
No sir,
I am not that monkey
seeking escape from vice in this manner
Excuse me, please.

In Sohan Singh Misha's poetry there are a number of olfactory images. These are directly connected with our power to smell, such as :

When you depart, you
take along the fragrance
of flowers.
So be with us
for a little time more.

Her fragrant flowers
gladdened many hearts.

Her charming impacts
cured the maladies
of the mind.

The images connected with the taste have another story to tell. In Misha's poetry such images are in abundance:

While opening the bottle of
soda-water
my innerself too bursts.
At many times
its loud wail
I munch with
the betel-leaf.

The tactile image is connected with the sensations of the skin. Sometimes we smart when a thorn or a needle pricks us suddenly. This is the sensation of touch. In its realisation the tactile image gets conceived. Some couplets can be cited as examples :

What a wonderful guest came —
whose stay for a short while
made my being fragrant.
The lips were placed upon lips
a melody, so sweet and enchanting,
ran through my whole being.
What a wonderful guest came —

Historical, mythological and traditional imagery has its own significance. Dr. Kulbir Singh Kaang is of the view that the new poetry is aware of the significance of mythology — "Mythology is such a treasure that is never exhausted. Its new possibilities are also inexhaustible. The imagery whose source is mythology leads to various interpretations. The poet crosses the boundaries of time and space and gets connected with eternity.

Misha has used some images linked with history,

mythology and tradition. Some such images are — *Farhad, Heer Ranyha, Sohni Mahiwal, Saida, Hanera, Swera, Mehalan, Dhaare, Tesa, Neel Kanth etc.* Quoted below are some instances of this type :

The rocky mountain
blunts the blade of
the spade.
But Farhad cannot discard
his mission of creating
the milky - stream.

Today again
Heer would go with Saida.
Today again
Dheedo would take care of
the herd of buffaloes

Show not the feigned love
for our ramshackled houses.
You are in fact enamoured
with the sky-high buildings.

In Sohan Singh Misha's poetry metaphors have an importance of their own. He has taken care of embellishing his poems with metaphors of rare excellence :

Dab the paper flowers
with fragrance.
In this manner
the room can be scented.

The dream-palaces
that we built together

have now assumed the
shape of deserted cottages.

Commenting on Misha's rhetorical devices, Dr. Dewan Singh says — "His poetry is a dialogue with the self or his friends. He always tries to save his poetry from sentimentality or mawkishness. He also avoids ornate figures of speech. He is content to use few simple words to convey his philosophy of life. This way his style becomes more impressive."

In this context, the words of Harnam Das Sehrai are very appropriate — "Misha does not consider it proper to use the commonplace figures of speech. These are mostly used by others as the last resort. He, in fact, wants to compose his poems without taking recourse to them. Whenever he uses them, the aim is not to embellish his creations. His eagerness is for conveying deeper meanings or the different layers of meanings :

The bones are smoky
like the wet fire-wood

Your talks pierce my heart
like thorns.
But smile plays on my lips
like the flowers in bloom.

Let's not fall flat
under the feet of time
like the roads.
We shall spread over the head
like the thundering clouds.

Someone put the sun
in his haversack
but doled out light

by handfuls.
Pitch darkness went past him
uttering a harsh sound.

Who knows when the world
would belong to us?
At present the things are
confined to both of us.

The waves beckoned us
but we could not
break our attachment
with the banks.

In the broad daylight
black markets flourish

His soul is like the filthy channel
that flows in the centre of the city.

No need to talk about soul
the body has its own afflictions.

Besides poems, Misha has composed *geets* and *ghazals*. Through his *geets* can be experienced the thrill of a swing and his poems flow like streams. In the *ghazals* too can be discerned his poetic excellencies. His *ghazals* composed in small metres convey big ideas. Pain, loneliness and anguish predominate his *ghazals*. The sun seems to be hung on the cross. The inclement seasons have been tolerated. The winds sway the body. He enters into dialogue with the pang of his heart by sup-

pressing tears under his eyelids. He is aware of the classical discipline of the *ghazal*. In his *ghazals* can be found a balance in the form and the content. His learn-edness does not weigh heavy in his couplets. The sym-bolism of his *ghazals* is varied. He adheres to the time-tested rules in the composition of his *ghazals*. The dic-tion that he uses is in consonance with the novelty of his ideals. His *ghazals* are the finest specimens of the subtlety of expression. He seldom falters in conveying modern sensibilities in this classical form.

Dr. Piar Singh says — "As in his poems, he has expressed many social problems in his *ghazals*. Like the Urdu and Persian poets, he has not used the symbols of *Saqi* (cup-bearer), tavern, cup, flask and *rind* (boozer). Even then he has maintained the flavour of *ghazal* at many places."

It can be surmised from what has been discussed above that Misha was neither sentimental and impatient like the revolutionary poets nor was he obscure and ob-scene like the early experimentalists. He was never ver-bose and shunned the ornate style. He also steered clear of the dark forest of the profuse figures of speech. His poetic world has a special aesthetic appeal. Viewed from this perspective, it transpires that he carved out a niche for himself in the world of Punjabi literature. Indeed he was a successful Punjabi poet of his age

Poet as Satirist

When a litterateur presents in his works the multi-dimensional and multi-layered reality of human existence, he uses the mode of satire to highlight the ugly and hideous aspects of the social order. This is the time tested device to reveal the pretence, hypocrisy and other social evils. Without taking recourse to the propagandist stance, a literary person can draw the attention of his readers to the stern realities of life through the medium of satire. Generally satire has been described as the literary art of appreciating or derogating a subject by making it look ridiculous. It is also used as a corrective of human folly.

Misha is a poet with a distinct voice of his own in the realm of modern Punjabi poetry. He is the only Punjabi poet whose ironic comments convey in a playful manner deeper meanings. He makes fun of the mechanical style of the life led by the man of today in this machine age. In an effort to harness the forces of nature, he has himself become a slave to his own inventions. The false show and hypocrisy of the middle class society evoke Misha's satirical comments which are at times quite devastative :

In this city
people do not wear clothes
rather the clothes wear bodies.
The clothes are cut
and adjusted
to the sagging bodies.

It is the special quality of satire that it is not aimed at an individual by design. The satirist does not align himself against particular person, otherwise his satire would stoop to the level of malice. This way the higher

literary purpose is defeated. Misha's satire is impartial and objective, with the result that it is very impressive. "He is the master of satire. He satirizes the double standards and hypocritical attitude of the modern society. He highlights duplicity, deceit and pretence in a natural style. He also reveals the hollowness of the popular values. Misha's satire, at the same time, focuses the attention of the reader on the ordinariness, incapability, helplessness of the hypocrite class. At times the craftiness and the manoeuvring of the political leaders also come under the sway of his satiric flail. He is particularly annoyed at the exploitation of the unwary and gullible public at the hands of these Machiavellian leaders.

In this age of financial stringency, political instability and brazen manipulation, the common man feels cheated and bewildered. He has to compromise at every step. His helplessness and his social responsibilities stand in the way of his confrontation with the evil forces. But his innerself is full of remorse :

I take my food
while seated on a broken bench
in some *dhaba*.
Half burnt
my stomach is here
heart there
with downcast eyes
I am a witness to the legitimate protest.
I measure my strength.
From here to the crowd there
the distance is not long
it is just equal to my
sense of shame

How long
you will be safe.

They say safety saves
 you will erode
 under the burden of restraint.
 How long
 after all
 how long
 you will keep to the left?

The selfishness, opportunism and falsity of the modern man weighs heavy on Misha's mind. He then adopts the loud satiric tone to show how the social structure of the modern age has undergone the change for the worse. The people too have become selfish and undependable pygmies :

The whole day in the office
 he bows before his senior
 says yes
 yes
 he laughs at his insipid jokes.
 They all do this
 like him.
 The boss wants this
 he wants respect

—

The guests have left
 let your face wear the expression
 of anger
 The bitter jokes
 the malicious whisperings
 might have stiffened your ears
 tired your painted lips.
 Let the smiles vanish
 with the lipstick

In such powerful poems as 'Momjama', 'Phukara' and 'Kam-Zarf', Misha makes the materialistic attitude of the common man, the target of his satirical comments:

Friends, we are very obedient —
The feelings of life
we have bound
in the movements
of the arms of the clock.

Another facet of satire is evident in these lines :

'There are many things to attend to',
The leader of the nation tells.
'Stop these bomb blasts',
The archbishop declares.
They talk about the price of
the new crop of wheat.
To talk about the salary
of the younger boy
Over-population and unemployment
all the politics of the nation
and the other nations
the betel-leaf is being munched
and the saliva spit out
the cigarette evaporates in smoke.

With the sharp weapon of satire, Sohan Singh Misha exposes in a very stylistic manner the wrong trends prevalent in the society. In his poetic collections, he has touched all the aspects. So much so that he has made the wily and deceitful behaviour of the politicians the butt of his seething and vitriolic criticism. Misha does not spare the bureaucratic system, the deceitful behaviour of the leader and the political manoeuvring. He views all this very minutely and rejects the unreal things outrightly :

The train is about to arrive
the country's presence is over-powering
it will be our concern to deal with it
leave aside other preoccupations.

The government hoodwinks the people by presenting wrong statistics and thereby creating the false sense of prosperity. It seldom attends to the pressing problems, nor does it take suitable measures :

I know
the official statistics
and the journalistic estimates
but the real number
of the dead is quite different.
The situation in the city
is alarming
the gate-keepers are
dozing off.

While taking stock of the overall life pattern of the man of today, Misha passes ironic comments on his mechanical and stereotyped existence. Even in the field of love, the modern man flatters in giving due importance to warm human relationships :

We spend the day in office
Home is just for night-stay
In the same house
Every member is a loner
If we have to live like this
The relations have to carry no name
Fellowship, compassion, love,
Friendship, relationship
Whatever these are
Merely for the show of the world

In Misha's poems the formal attitude of the people towards each other comes under critical scrutiny. He does not relish the hypocritical behaviour of the upper middle class. The artificial structure of mutual regards for one another also comes under the umbrella of his disapproval.

In his poems Sohan Singh Misha presents his concept of love. He is aware of the fact that in this age people do not love sincerely. They merely pretend to do so. He alludes to a folk-lore to bring home his point of view. In the poem *Baddal*, he says :

She is so beautiful
the daughter of Tulla
but the lovers are feeling tipsy.
They have jumped into the river *Jhana*,
to prove the truthfulness of their love
by clutching the unbaked clay-pots

The poet is unhappy due to unequal distribution of wealth among the human beings. This lop-sided structure of the society portends disaster. The workers who earn their bread by the sweat of their brow are half-starved, whereas the money-bags are leading luxurious lives without putting in hard work. The poor people create the things of beauty but they are not allowed to enjoy the fruits of their labour. The rich are reaping a rich harvest without so much as moving their littlefinger :

Those who have built
these big buildings
sleep on the roadside
under the canopy of the sky.
Whatever the Pandits
and the Bhais and the Maulanas say
is beyond the point.
I know there have always been

two classes in the society
the haves and the havenots.

The upper class is only interested in exploiting the lower class. The people of the privileged class have contacts with the persons of their own ilk. They regard the poor people as below the level of humans. They are even labelled as sub-human :

Do not show false love
for our cottages
you are in league
with the people
in high buildings.

From the above discussion, it transpires that Misha uses the mode of satire with a view to present his attitude to men and matters in an impressive manner. Even then his satire never stoops low to the level of buffoonery. Rather it is of a high order and its effect is everlasting. By making use of satire, the poet depicts the pitiable condition of the man of today. He also focuses on the compromising attitude of the people so as to get temporary benefits. Social injustice also comes under the ironic comments of his poetic genius. The contradictions in the lives of the petty bourgeoisie stand in the way of their amelioration. In short, Misha's mode of satire is an important and impressive aspect of his poetry. It also lends literary flavour and social tone to his poetic creations.

Poems

The Dear Departed

When
the bonds are to be snapped
the person gasps for breath
wriggles on the bed
screams to find the bird
beating its wings
against the cage.

At last
stillness takes over
the body is benumbed
and the dust establishes
its contact with dust
leaving others befuddled.

Then
for a day or two
the empty stomach accepts
reluctantly
the bread drenched in tears
the munificence of the neighbours.

Once again
the smoke wreathes up

the chimney
but the members of the family
feel lost in the house
haunted by the departed soul.

A shadow
flits across the rooms
pauses here and lingers there
and
at the crack of the dawn
someone clears the throat
in the courtyard.

Slowly life regains its hold
smile returns hesitantly
yet still
the jolt given by the mourning episode
reverberates in the consciousness.

The loss
the weight of loss
still overpowers the limbs
and
the vessel of dreams
finds it hard
to get back its former shape.

The Morrow

Just now I have risen
from your dreams
the dawn has entered
through the window of pale light.

The night long
I played the game of colours
under the cover of aromatic darkness
now again
I am inundated with pale light.

Asleep or dozing still
on my bed
the fragrance of your limbs
has overpowered my senses
my whole being is undulating
on the currents of the whiff.

Earlier
whenever I got up from bed
I found myself face to face
with the 'situation vacant' columns
of the newspapers.

The pale day
is reminiscent of the days
gone by.
It no more frightens me

as it did in the days of yore
since the fragrance of your limbs
has overpowered my senses.
But I have a feeling
that the chastity of the fragrance
would be lost in the hectic day.

Just now I have risen
from your dreams
the dawn has entered
through the window of pale light.

The Sin

I find my breath
stinking
all the day long
in darkness and in light
at dawn as well as at dusk.

An incomplete foetus
soaked in blood
writhing in pain
letting out mute cry.

God be praised
not a blot tarnished
the turban of my father
I am his daughter
gentle and gracious.

But now my own weight
is too much for me
my body is bogged down
by the sense of
unpardonable sin.

My dreams are cursed
my sleep is damned
my thoughts are revolting
in the mirror of my heart
are reflected
the contours of my sin.

Where should I go
where can I throw
the filth
stuck to my body ?

How can I escape
the wrath
of my own shadow ?

My breath is stinking
day and night

A Knock

The wily mind
wallows in sin
the slothful body

trickles through the chunk of time.

The door bolted from within
is knocked at from the outside
what is it that you do here?

Do you dread
the open light of the sun
or the inner silence?

You are shivering
in the chilly fear of your ownself
unbolt the door
and come out in the open
else the door would be
crashed through

Prism

Without desire
and without hope
a sharp-cornered piece of glass
am I.

A guileless beam of pure light
touched my body
and I played with
seven colours.

The lovers of fun
gathered around me
to witness the show.

It was not
a manifestation of myself
it was a miracle
of pure light.
None of the seven colours
was mine.

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